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## Reading and Ownership

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History of the Book in Britain

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The Twentieth Century and Beyond

Edited by  
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**Reading and ownership**

**ANDREW NASH, CLAIRE SQUIRES AND SHAFQUAT TOWHEED**

‘It is as easy to make sweeping statements about reading tastes as to indict a nation, and as pointless.’<sup>1</sup> This jocular remark by a librarian made in the *Times* in 1952 sums up the dangers and difficulties of writing the history of reading. As a field of study in the humanities it is still in its infancy and encompasses a range of different methodologies and theoretical approaches.<sup>2</sup> Historians of reading are not solely interested in what people read, but also turn their attention to the why, where and how of the reading experience. Reading can be solitary, silent, secret, surreptitious; it can be oral, educative, enforced, or assertive of a collective identity. For what purposes are individuals reading? How do they actually use books and other textual material? What are the physical environments and spaces of reading? What social, educational, technological, commercial, legal, or ideological contexts underpin reading practices? Finding answers to these questions is compounded by the difficulty of locating and interpreting evidence. As Mary Hammond points out, ‘most reading acts in history remain unrecorded, unmarked or forgotten’.<sup>3</sup> Available sources are wide but inchoate: diaries, letters and autobiographies; personal and oral testimonies; marginalia; and records of societies and reading groups all lend themselves more to the case-study approach than the historical survey. Statistics offer analysable data but have the effect of producing identikit rather than actual human beings. The twenty-first century affords further possibilities, and challenges, with its traces of digital reader activity, but the map is ever-changing.

Book historians of this period are confronted by a further problem. More so than other chapters in this volume – and more so than in equivalent chapters in previous volumes in the series – there is a paucity of extant research for the topic of reading and ownership. In particular, assembling and interpreting evidence about the habits and experiences of actual readers – what Jonathan Rose has called ‘the history of audiences’ – has only just started.<sup>4</sup> While research projects like the Reading Experience Database (which ends at 1945) and the Reading Sheffield project have begun to organise and preserve source material, a large part of

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The reading tastes of the “under forties”, *Times* 29 August 1952, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent summary, see Hammond, ‘Book history in the reading experience’.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>4</sup> Rose, ‘Rereading the English common reader’.

the period remains unmapped with research questions still to be formulated.<sup>5</sup> Writing a definitive history of reading in the twentieth century and beyond is thus at present an impossible task. What follows is no more than a preliminary sketch of the period. It focuses mainly on institutions of reading and on changing social and cultural attitudes to reading practices. It also draws on statistical and sociological surveys from the period which attempted to tabulate and evaluate changing reading habits.

## I – 1914-1945

### *First world war*

As noted throughout this volume, the First World War intensified public interest in books and reading. In the early months of the war in particular, public appetite for information led to ‘newspaper rushes’ at stalls and shops.<sup>6</sup> After an initial period of slump, publishers and booksellers quickly found that sales of books were also increasing, especially of cheap publications such as Nelson’s sixpenny classics series.<sup>7</sup> With fewer alternative outlets for leisure, reading became an important form of distraction. Public libraries recorded increases in fiction borrowing as ‘romantic tales and detective thrillers’ offered readers an escape from wartime living conditions.<sup>8</sup> As Jane Potter remarks, there was a ‘fine line between so-called “light-reading material” and propaganda’, but there was also a greater appetite for more instructive reading.<sup>9</sup> At a conference of the English Association in 1916, members of the book trade observed how the war had generated new interest in ‘the best books, and especially for poetry’, a trend which a reporter in the *Times Literary Supplement* attributed to ‘the heightened sense of values brought about by seeing life, liberty, and country daily at stake before all eyes.’<sup>10</sup> Books dealing with the immediate causes of the war and ‘the history of Europe out of which it came’ were also cited as popular; and author and publisher John Buchan and bookseller J.G. Wilson were at one in claiming that ‘there never was a time when more books of the best sort were being read in England, especially if we include that greater England which is now in France.’<sup>11</sup>

That expanded – or displaced – market created new reading audiences in trenches, war hospitals, and among prisoners of war.<sup>12</sup> Voluntary organisations such as the Camps’ Library collected books through local post offices for distribution to the trenches and prisoner-of-war camps. The Red Cross and St Johns Ambulance War Library sent reading matter to the sick and wounded in hospitals, while the YMCA provided tent-based reading rooms for soldiers.<sup>13</sup> First hand reports record that trench-bound soldiers mainly read for escapism or out of boredom, but reading was also an important way of staying in touch with

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<sup>5</sup> The Reading Experience Database < <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>>. Reading Sheffield <[www.readingsheffield.co.uk](http://www.readingsheffield.co.uk)> is an oral history project gathering evidence mainly from readers born before 1945.

<sup>6</sup> See Colclough, ‘No such bookselling’, pp. 29-31.

<sup>7</sup> Towheed and King, *Reading and the First World War*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Potter, *Boys in khaki*, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> John McCann Bailey, ‘Literature and the war’, *Times Literary Supplement* 1 June 1916, p. 253.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See Towheed and King, *Reading and the First World War* for a range of recent approaches and perspectives. See also Imogen Gassert ‘In a foreign field’, what soldiers in the trenches liked to read’, *Times Literary Supplement* 10 May 2002, pp. 17-19.

<sup>13</sup> See King, “Books are more to me than food”.

home, whether factually or imaginatively, and thus sustaining ‘a degree of civilian identity’.<sup>14</sup> Books and newspapers were passed around and in some prisoner-of-war camps readers formed study groups ‘centred on a small library of vocational texts’.<sup>15</sup>

Schemes like the Camps’ Library attempted to guide soldiers in their reading and to encourage personal improvement, but the most popular kind of reading was fiction. E.W. Hornung, who operated a YMCA library for British soldiers at Arras for two months in early 1918, recorded that eighty-seven per cent of books borrowed were works of popular or classic fiction.<sup>16</sup> Hornung nevertheless observed an eclectic taste among the readers, from ‘romance readers’ who devoured Charles Garvice, to ‘rough poor lads’ who demanded Ruskin and Carlyle.<sup>17</sup> To judge from distribution figures, religious texts constituted a substantial part of reading in the trenches. Oxford University Press alone supplied four and a half million copies of the New Testament for the battlefield, and one estimate suggests some forty million Bibles, prayers books, and other religious texts were distributed to servicemen.<sup>18</sup>

### *Inter-war reading*

Joseph McAleer argues that, as well as perpetuating existing reading habits, the First World War newly encouraged reading among war workers, ‘either in the Forces or on civilian duty’, whose appetite for ‘lighter forms of reading’ represented ‘the principal growth area in the reading public’ after the war.<sup>19</sup> This growth was abundantly visible to interwar cultural commentators like Q.D. Leavis. In her book *Fiction and the reading public* (1932), Leavis began with the line: ‘In twentieth-century England not only every one can read, but it is safe to add that every one does read.’<sup>20</sup> A dramatic increase in the sale of national daily newspapers – from 3.1 million copies a day in 1918 to 10.6 million twenty years later<sup>21</sup> – was only the most conspicuous indicator of the growth of the reading public. The expansion of library systems brought books to within a wider reach of the population, while in the 1930s the spread of book clubs and sixpenny paperbacks increased book ownership. Periods of depression and unemployment brought greater surplus time for reading. At the height of the depression in 1931 the *Publishers’ Circular* reported ‘an amazing increase in the amount of reading done by the general public’.<sup>22</sup> The interwar period was also marked by a preoccupation with investigating and measuring the activity of reading. Alongside Leavis’s academic study, Mass-Observation surveys, commenced in 1937, attempted to capture information about what, why, and how people read.

Leavis proceeded from the premise that reading activity was strongly determined by class contexts and Mass-Observation findings largely endorsed her views. Major modern studies of reading by McAleer and Rose have underlined how changes in reading practice in this period were strongly linked both to social and economic factors that influenced literary taste and to institutional contexts that determined the acquisition of reading matter. Working-class readers generally borrowed books from public libraries and purchased reading matter from newsagents, stationers, or market stalls. Middle- and upper-class readers were more likely to subscribe to circulating libraries or purchase from bookshops which, as Leavis

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>16</sup> King, ‘E.W. Hornung’s unpublished “diary”’, p. 373.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 377, 379.

<sup>18</sup> Towheed and King, *Reading and the First World War*, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Penguin special*, p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, p. 73.

noted, were sparse outside London and the university towns. By the 1930s this pattern was beginning to break down as class and institutional barriers became more blurred. McAleer argues that the one significant change in the 'size and complexion of the reading public' was 'the addition of the new "leisured class" ... drawn largely from the lower-middle and working classes'.<sup>23</sup> It was this group of readers whose needs and demands were serviced by the cultural and commercial changes in the period.

### *Library expansion*

More than anything else, growth in reading after 1918 was facilitated by expanded public library provision. A Mass-Observation report of 1942 declared it 'impossible to overestimate the importance of the library in determining the reading habits of Britain'.<sup>24</sup> In 1915, however, it had been estimated that thirty-eight per cent of the population of England and fifty-four per cent of Wales lived outside a library area.<sup>25</sup> The total number of books in UK public libraries rose from eleven million in 1911 to twenty-seven million in 1935 and an estimated forty-two million in 1950.<sup>26</sup> The catalyst was the Public Libraries Act (1919) which allowed county councils in England and Wales to become library authorities (a separate Act of 1918 introduced changes in Scotland) and abolished the 'penny in the pound' rate limitation which restricted spending.<sup>27</sup> Provision could now be extended to smaller urban and rural areas where branch libraries were often set up in local schools or village halls. By 1935 the counties of England and Wales could boast 'a total stock of five and a half million books and a reading public of over two million people who had had no library service before 1919'.<sup>28</sup> The expansion became a source of national pride. A 1927 report by a committee of the Board of Education proclaimed 'a remarkable progress, much accelerated of recent years in the library movement as a whole'; the public library was now 'an indispensable element in the life of the community' and 'recognised as an engine of great potentialities for national welfare'.<sup>29</sup> Such rhetoric needs to be qualified by statistical evidence which shows that, if there was a new reading public, it consisted of the middle and artisan classes more than unskilled workers. The 1942 Mass-Observation survey discovered that seventy-six per cent of unskilled workers did not use any form of library.<sup>30</sup>

Change was also discernible in the public library's physical environment. As open access became more standard, most libraries consisted of a reading room (and sometimes a newspaper room), and separate reference and lending departments. Provision for children increased significantly after 1918 with more libraries operating separate lending facilities. In the mid-1930s Walthamstow opened 'the first dedicated teenage library'.<sup>31</sup> The legacy of this expanded provision for young readers is visible in Mass-Observation surveys of the 1940s which found that public library borrowing was 'appreciably more frequent among younger people than among older people'.<sup>32</sup>

The public library movement had always been informed by a civic ideal which promoted reading and literacy as a means rather than an end. Libraries continued to be

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> Carnell, *County libraries*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Munford, *Penny rate*, p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Black, *The public library*, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Stockham, *British county libraries*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> Denham, 'Public library services for children', p. 108.

<sup>32</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, p. 64.

conceived of as guardians of national education and often served as spaces for adult education classes and University Extension lectures. Preoccupation over the library's recreational role had in the early years of the century provoked the 'Great Fiction Debate', and guiding reading continued to be a central aim of library authorities. Rural expansion offered a particular challenge in this regard. An advice manual on setting up a village library from 1918 emphasised the need to provide readers with the 'rubbish' they ask for: 'There is only one answer to the question: "what do village people want to read?" They want to read what interests them quickly and easily, not anything which presupposes both a wide education and an untired body and mind.'<sup>33</sup> In public libraries readers were generally allowed to borrow one fiction and one non-fiction title at a time, yet fiction was by far the most borrowed category. A 1924 investigation revealed that while sixty-three per cent of books stocked in urban libraries were non-fiction, seventy-eight per cent of issues were fiction.<sup>34</sup> Statistics like this encouraged the objective outlined in the 1927 Board of Education report to supply 'recreational literature of as good quality as [the] public can digest', and 'if the proportion of indifferent fiction is high ... to lead people to discriminate between the better and the worse, and to arrive at a higher standard.'<sup>35</sup>

The range of books stocked in public libraries was limited, however. As a 1933 commentator noted, readers couldn't expect to find 'an ample supply of the popular biographies and novels as soon as they are published. It is impossible for the public library to cater for such immediate popular demands.'<sup>36</sup> To be certain of sampling the most recent books, readers needed to subscribe to one of the commercial libraries such as Boots, Mudie's or W.H. Smith's. By the mid-1930s Boots Booklovers Library, which has come to be viewed as a powerful instrument in the emergence of middlebrow reading culture, had over 400 branches and half a million subscribers. In 1926 it cost 42s to get books on demand, 17s6d to choose from books in circulation, and 10s6d for the standard service. The most expensive option thus allowed subscribers to acquire a new novel a week for less than 10d; the cheapest meant books could be borrowed for around 2½d weekly. For Q.D. Leavis the structures of borrowing and the 'strict moral censorship' of the libraries created a situation where readers – especially those majority taking the cheapest subscription option – were 'prepared to have their reading determined for them.'<sup>37</sup> The majority of circulating library readers were women. According to Nicola Beauman, 'Boots catered more for suburban shoppers than for fashionable ladies' and 'only one quarter of the library customers were male.'<sup>38</sup> This was confirmed by the 1942 Mass-Observation survey which also found that borrowers were more likely to be aged over 30.<sup>39</sup>

Mass-Observation also recorded that subscription libraries were 'hardly used by poorer people'.<sup>40</sup> Readers from the lower-middle and working classes were more likely to acquire books from twopenny, or 'no-deposit', libraries which spread rapidly in the 1930s. Twopenny libraries were mostly run as adjuncts to newsagents, tobacconists or department stores, and their ubiquity led the President of the Library Association to remark in 1938: 'it would seem the lending of reading matter is becoming an auxiliary of every business.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sayle, *Village libraries*, p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public*, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Munford, *Penny rate*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> McColvin, *How to use books*, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Beauman, *A very great profession*, pp. 174, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>41</sup> McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, p. 58.

Twopenny libraries probably added to the reading public because of their wide dissemination. As the publisher Harold Raymond observed, circulating libraries were in the main confined to towns, whereas twopenny libraries were to be found 'in villages and in suburbs' and thus more easily accessible to those living outside urban centres.<sup>42</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest that twopenny libraries served a working-class readership only. George Orwell recalled that the library attached to the Hampstead bookshop in which he worked in the mid-1930s was 'frequented by all types from baronets to bus-conductors' and that subscribers were probably 'a fair cross-section of London's reading public'.<sup>43</sup> The restricted range of reading available in twopenny libraries, however, does allow for some conclusions about what the majority of the working-class public read. Economics dictated that most books stocked were works of popular fiction, predominantly romance, westerns, thrillers and detective stories. Orwell wrote with barely disguised contempt at the insatiable demand among men for detective stories and among women 'of all kinds and ages' for the novels of Ethel M. Dell.<sup>44</sup> In his advice manual *How to run a twopenny library* (1938), Ronald Batty advised that 'no efficient service for the supply of non-fiction titles can be given, whether juvenile, or any other type of book except popular fiction'.<sup>45</sup> New novels priced at 7s6d 'barely pay for themselves at a loan fee of twopence weekly'.<sup>46</sup> The commercial basis of the operation ensured that choice was limited. Would-be librarians were advised to 'please the majority, which means a profit, and discourage the small minority of readers whose reading is specialised'.<sup>47</sup>

Batty's advice may paint a partial picture of the typical twopenny library. He acknowledged that while 'Intellectual writers are not so popular in twopenny libraries at present ... there are some slight signs of an improvement in the public's taste in this direction'.<sup>48</sup> Christopher Hilliard has recently argued that the availability of middlebrow fiction in twopenny libraries 'problematizes the distinction between a middle-class public for new hardcover novels and a working-class readership of fiction that appeared in cheap papers and magazines'.<sup>49</sup> The key factor here is that by the end of the 1930s the works of contemporary authors were more readily available in cheap editions. Batty's 1938 checklist of the most popular authors in twopenny libraries included D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh, none of whom had appeared in earlier lists covering 1933-35 compiled by the *Library Association Record*.<sup>50</sup>

While it is hard to assess how far such libraries altered reading tastes, it is clear that they increased the reading habit. John Boon, whose firm Mills & Boon profited enormously by the twopennies, recalled how 'commercial libraries needed a tremendous supply of books to keep their customers happy. Some of them would read a book in, say, three days'.<sup>51</sup> Once again evidence suggests use was strongly gendered. Mass-Observation found that women used twopenny libraries twice as much as men (though this may not correlate with reading habits) and that the space was often 'a social meeting ground' for young working-class

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<sup>42</sup> Raymond, *Publishing and bookselling*, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Orwell, 'Bookshop memories', p. 275.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Batty, *How to run a twopenny library*, p. 77.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Hilliard, 'The two-penny library', p. 201.

<sup>50</sup> See McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, p. 88.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

mothers.<sup>52</sup> The typical borrower read purely for relaxation and was mostly influenced in the choice of books by an author's name, although the appearance – notably the dustwrapper – and weight of a book, the number of date-stamps inside it, and the influence of cinema were also factors in selection.<sup>53</sup> Pay-as-you-go libraries declined after the war but remained attractive to readers in search of certain types of fiction. In 1957 Richard Hoggart pointed to the importance of 'stationers' fourpenny libraries whose main function is to hold a large stock of the kinds of fiction ... of which the public libraries never have enough copies.'<sup>54</sup>

Working-class reading of the interwar period was not restricted to commercial and rate-paying libraries. In industrial areas – notably south Wales – institute and welfare hall libraries served local communities. Chris Baggs estimates that there were between 150 and 200 reading facilities in the miners' libraries of south Wales, funded through a combination of payments by the miners themselves and, from 1921, via the Miners Welfare Fund, the product of a levy imposed on coal owners to provide amenities for the miners. While the size and stock of individual libraries varied considerably, 'scarcely any mining community went without a library or reading room provided largely by themselves, for themselves.'<sup>55</sup> Stock was controlled by the miners, but as with public libraries, the promotion of serious and politically-committed reading struggled against the overwhelming demand for popular fiction, which in many cases constituted over ninety per cent of book loans.<sup>56</sup> Research has pointed to a 'neglect of politics': Marx and Lenin appeared on the bookshelves but miners and their families were more likely to borrow Dickens, Mrs Henry Wood, and Edgar Rice Burroughs.<sup>57</sup> Surviving collections, such as that of the Tylorstown library in the Rhondda, include 'almost a complete set of Left Book Club editions' but are dominated by 'light fiction'.<sup>58</sup>

Institute libraries went into decline in the 1930s following the economic depression. Acquisition of stock was cut back and the spread of county libraries drew readers away. Declining revenues led to the closure of many libraries after the war. It may be an overstatement to argue that the 'dramatic contraction' of the coal industry after 1959 and the rise of alternative forms of entertainment, such as television and bingo, suggested that 'reading was [no longer] one of the major recreational pursuits in the coalfield',<sup>59</sup> but the decline of the institute libraries certainly point to the disappearance of a distinct reading community created and nurtured by an industrial way of life.

### ***Book ownership***

The class divisions evident in library trends were also conspicuous in book buying and ownership, although once again the period witnessed change. One historian has argued that after 1918 'many more books, periodicals, newspapers were to be seen in ordinary homes',<sup>60</sup> and recent research by Jonathan Rose has traced the many ways in which men and women of the working-class accessed and read books of all kinds. A 'spirit of mutual education'<sup>61</sup> underlay the formation of informal groups for intellectual exchange, and reading in working-

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<sup>52</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, pp. 83-7.

<sup>54</sup> Hoggart, *The uses of literacy*, p. 250.

<sup>55</sup> Baggs, 'How well read was my valley?', pp. 287-8

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>57</sup> Rose, *The intellectual life*, p. 248.

<sup>58</sup> Francis, 'Survey of Miners' Institute and Welfare Hall libraries', p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>60</sup> Roberts, *The classic slum*, p. 228.

<sup>61</sup> Rose, *The intellectual life*, p. 83.



class homes was often a collective activity with books circulating among friends and co-workers. Rose detects a 'promiscuous mix of high and low' culture among working-class readers of all regions, generations, and economic strata' and concludes that by the 1930s and 1940s 'a large personal library was no longer a rarity in the slums.'<sup>62</sup>

Increased ownership of books among poorer households was facilitated by the availability of cheaper editions of 'classics' or 'standard' works. Series such as Dent's Everyman's Library became a 'standby' of the Workers' Educational Association.<sup>63</sup> Educative books were also within reach of a wider spread of the population. The Home University Library, commenced in 1911, issued books on science, religion, history, geography, literature and philosophy written by academic experts, priced initially at 1s. Although production dropped during and after the war, by 1935 176 volumes were available at the still cheap price of 2s6d.<sup>64</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s the Thinker's Library (published by C.A. Watts & Co.) offered 2s reprints of books by Darwin, J.S. Mill, Thomas Huxley, H.G. Wells and others. Once again statistical evidence should warn against generalisation: Mass-Observation reported in 1940 that sixty-six per cent of working-class adults never bought books.<sup>65</sup>

Personal libraries became more widespread in the 1930s across all class groups as readers came to acquire books in new ways. Circulation wars led daily newspapers to begin selling books via coupons cut out from the paper. These were typically encyclopaedias, reference works, and complete sets of authors like Dickens and Shakespeare. Mass-observation recorded that libraries in many low-income households consisted entirely of such books, along with prize books. Mail order was an effective way of reaching readers physically or psychologically distanced from bookshops. In 1928 the Phoenix Book Company began selling books on an instalment plan. Readers were offered a selection of around 5,000 titles with the payment spread out at 2s6d a month (1d a day). An early publicity slogan declared 'a liberal education at the price of a daily newspaper'.<sup>66</sup>

The spread of book clubs in the 1930s served a more middle-class audience. Mass-Observation reported that membership was higher among younger people and much higher among the better educated and better off: 'among the great mass of people their impact is negligible.'<sup>67</sup> The Book Society, founded in 1929 and modelled on the American Book of the Month Club, came to epitomise middlebrow literary culture, representing for Q.D. Leavis a standardisation of taste.<sup>68</sup> More far-reaching in terms of reducing the price of books and thus encouraging book ownership was the Readers Union, commenced in 1937 with 17,000 members by the following year.<sup>69</sup> The club's aim was to 'select an important book of general interest each month, a book of unusual merit, published at a price beyond the reach of most book buyers' and make it available for 2s6d.<sup>70</sup> Selections included some works of non-fiction ordinarily priced as high as 16s. The claim that 'many members had not seriously bought a book until they joined Readers Union' is hard to prove, especially since 'very large numbers' were enrolled through booksellers.<sup>71</sup> But in offering recently-published titles at huge

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 371, 230.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>64</sup> See *Times* 27 May 1936, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Mass-Observation, *Wartime reading*, pp. 21-2.

<sup>66</sup> Baker, *Low cost of bookloving*, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public*, p. 22.

<sup>69</sup> Baker, *Low cost of bookloving*, p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

reductions the club participated in the increased democratisation of reading. An early advertisement declared: ‘What a penny a day will bring you’.<sup>72</sup> As Nicola Humble notes, this and contemporaneous ventures such as The Book Club, one of many clubs run by Foyle’s bookshop, used a promotional language ‘designed to evoke a life of cultured gentility – “splendid books”, “a first class library”’ – whereas the most likely lure for readers was the heavily reduced prices on offer.<sup>73</sup>

It is the nature of book clubs to appeal and respond to special interest groups, helping to construct reading as a communal activity. Significant in this context was the Left Book Club, launched by Gollancz in May 1936.<sup>74</sup> Issuing a newly published book each month at 2s6d (around a quarter of the price of most new works of non-fiction), membership reached nearly 40,000 within ten months and peaked at 57,000 in 1939.<sup>75</sup> Demonstrating the increased level of social and political commitment to reading, the club’s success spawned ancillary activities including political rallies, summer schools and discussion groups, which numbered 1500 by the war years.<sup>76</sup> Partly in an attempt to capture industrial workers, Gollancz introduced an allied series ‘The New People’s Library’ publishing introductory books at 6d to club members.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, membership remained predominantly middle class: ‘It was estimated that 75 percent of the members were white-collared workers, black-coated professionals, and newly converted Left intellectuals.’<sup>78</sup>

The arrival of Penguins and Pelicans in the late 1930s signalled a shift in attitude towards book buying and ownership. In books and essays of this period reading is often compared in terms of opportunity cost to attending the cinema or smoking. Allen Lane’s decision to price his Penguin paperbacks at sixpence and market them as ‘something that could be bought as easily and as casually as a packet of cigarettes’<sup>79</sup> was an attempt to promote ownership of books as part of everyday living. His other important innovation was to bring recently published works into the hands of a larger public more quickly. He judged that in the 1930s ‘a successful book ‘probably didn’t get through to the suburbs for ten years’.<sup>80</sup> By selling his books through general outlets such as Woolworths and even a vending machine, the Penguincubator, he aimed to capture those readers who still perceived bookshops to be the preserve of different classes, convinced that there was ‘a vast reading public for *intelligent* books at a low price’.<sup>81</sup> He was right. Mass-observation detected a new attitude to book-buying, claiming that ‘those who practically never buy books in the ordinary way will buy Penguins quite frequently, and those who are very careful and critical in buying more expensive books will buy them on spec.’<sup>82</sup> When Lane added the non-fiction Pelicans, new and recently-published books on politics, religion, and the whole range of the arts and sciences were available to ‘the lay reader’.<sup>83</sup>

At the other end of the scale, book collecting underwent a dramatic history in the interwar period. In the 1920s prices rocketed for both antiquarian books and limited editions

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> Humble, *The feminine middlebrow novel*, p. 44.

<sup>74</sup> See also Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>75</sup> Lewis, *The Left Book Club*, p. 22-3.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80-1.

<sup>78</sup> Samuels, ‘The Left Book Club’, p. 75.

<sup>79</sup> Lewis, *Penguin special*, p. 87.

<sup>80</sup> Hilliard, ‘The two-penny library’, p. 200.

<sup>81</sup> Lewis, *Penguin special*, p. 122 (original emphasis).

<sup>82</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, p. 29.

<sup>83</sup> Lewis, *Penguin special*, p. 270.

of contemporary authors as books were turned into investment objects. George Bernard Shaw allegedly remarked that a publisher's first strategy in deciding what edition to issue was to begin by 'plundering the collectors, who never read anything.'<sup>84</sup> When the stock-market collapsed the book-market followed and, as John Carter recalled, 'collectors of the investment-minded kind had their paper profits wiped out inside a few months.'<sup>85</sup> The *Book Collector's Quarterly* welcomed the disappearance of the 'artificial and unreasonable increases', commenting in 1930: 'It is to be hoped that those who benefited by the dizzy rise have suffered from the giddy fall ... and the field is now open to those whose aim it is to collect and read books, and not simply to hold them for a rise.'<sup>86</sup> New tastes did emerge. A 1934 exhibition at Bumpus booksellers entitled 'New Paths in Book-Collecting' revealed new interests in cheaper or more ephemeral forms such as yellowbacks, detective fiction, and serial fiction.<sup>87</sup> In addition, eighteenth-century literature, war books and modern literature were identified as sought after subjects. To John Carter, the 'most important of all [trends] to the historian of taste, was that 'modern and even contemporary authors could now be collected without the suspicion of faddism or eccentricity.'<sup>88</sup>

While the interwar period witnessed a decline in the number of private collectors whose purses and proclivities allowed collecting on a massive scale, there was a corresponding growth of the smaller collector. P.H. Muir argued in 1952 that in the first half of the twentieth century book collecting became 'a pursuit not only for rich men ... but for those of modest incomes also'.<sup>89</sup> The period also witnessed a growth in societies devoted to book collecting. The First Edition Club, formed in 1922, claimed to be 'the first English organization of bibliophiles to maintain a meeting-place for its members.'<sup>90</sup> Its activities included 'exhibitions illustrating special aspects of book-collecting'<sup>91</sup> and in 1930 it inaugurated the *Book Collector's Quarterly*.

### ***Second World War***

As has been widely documented, the biggest challenge for the book trade during the Second World War was supplying the remarkable demand for reading matter. Statistical evidence suggests that reading activity declined in the immediate outbreak of war in September 1939. A 1940 Mass-Observation report noted a 'big drop'<sup>92</sup> in the reading of books and magazines in the first week of conflict, along with fewer issues from public libraries and a downturn at booksellers. In the same year the National Book Council lamented: 'It is an indictment of the nation that only about fifteen per cent of the population use public libraries.'<sup>93</sup> The situation soon changed, however. According to Valerie Holman, 1940 was a 'turning-point in reading: books borrowed and books bought both began to show a significant increase in numbers, and encouragement of reading became a matter of [government] policy.'<sup>94</sup> The Board of Education issued a circular to authorities urging extension of the public library service and temporary branches and mobile libraries were introduced to encourage more reading. In 1940

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<sup>84</sup> Carter, *Taste and technique*, p. 58.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>86</sup> *Book collector's quarterly* 1 (1930), pp. vi-vii.

<sup>87</sup> See Carter (ed.), *New paths*.

<sup>88</sup> Carter, *Taste and technique*, p. 37.

<sup>89</sup> Muir, *Talks on book-collecting*, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> *Book Collector's Quarterly* 1 (1930), pp. v-vi.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>92</sup> Mass-Observation, *Wartime reading*, p. 1

<sup>93</sup> Holman, *Print for victory*, p. 48.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

a twenty per cent increase in book issues was the norm nationwide. One mobile library in a housing estate in Manchester increased its issues from 4,000 to 10,000.<sup>95</sup> The Library Association's 1940 report proclaimed: 'Remarkable figures have come from counties and towns in the Midlands, where towards the end of the year, monthly issues in some cases showed a fifty per cent increase over the corresponding period in the previous year, and one or two instances of doubled issues. With a very few exceptions, the tale is one of record use of the public libraries in all parts of the country.'<sup>96</sup>

The demographics of borrowing shifted. Child evacuation was a notable factor in the rise in library issues in county districts. The 1942 Mass Observation report revealed that in city borough libraries fiction and non-fiction borrowing had declined, as in the case of the London-based Bermondsey public library, where lending levels dropped from 25,353 in March 1938 to 18,592 in March 1942. In contrast, rural town libraries registered increased lending levels. In the small south-west town of Bridgwater, fiction and nonfiction borrowing rose from 8,483 in March 1938 to 11,415 in March 1942.<sup>97</sup>

By 1943 the wartime surge in reading was visible to booksellers who reported having 'extended sales tremendously among the working classes.'<sup>98</sup> Christina Foyle, the leading London bookseller, spoke of 'a tremendous boom in books' which she put down to various factors: 'books aren't rationed, there's no purchase tax, and they don't require coupons, and then people have so much more time for reading'.<sup>99</sup> In the early years the most noticeable sales increase was for popular reprints of the classics, notably Everyman's Library. Fiction remained the most popular genre but there was also demand for books on war and international affairs, and an increased interest in technical books as war workers sought quick knowledge on unfamiliar tasks. The daily press expanded to what Raymond Williams in *The long revolution* called 'something like the full reading public ... reaching over 15,000,000 in 1947.'<sup>100</sup> Mass-observation reported that people were undertaking 'more purposeful, planned reading, and less purely recreational reading',<sup>101</sup> a trend observed by George Orwell in 1942 when he argued that the 'enormous sale of Penguin books, Pelican books, and other cheap titles' meant that 'the average book which the ordinary man reads is a better book than it would have been three years ago.'<sup>102</sup>

Reading was a cheap and convenient activity for wartime living conditions. Blackouts and transport restrictions meant more time was spent at home. In October 1940 the *Publishers' Circular* claimed that 'reading had supplanted the wireless in most homes as the principal leisure activity.'<sup>103</sup> Mass-observation recorded that in choosing a book 'one of the most important qualities' readers looked for was 'its suitability for reading in bed.'<sup>104</sup> Outside the home reading spaces were strongly determined by availability of lighting. Tubes, trains and railway stations were the most popular spaces, ahead of parks, teashops and cafes, and buses. Inevitably, reading proved a popular activity in air-raid shelters where libraries were often run by wardens or volunteers. The unused underground station at Bethnal Green

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Holman, *Print for victory*, p. 49.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>98</sup> Rose, *The intellectual life*, pp. 233-4.

<sup>99</sup> McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, p. 74

<sup>100</sup> Williams, *The long revolution*, p. 199.

<sup>101</sup> Mass-Observation, *Books and the public*, [p. 201].

<sup>102</sup> Lewis, *Penguin special*, p. 156.

<sup>103</sup> McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, p. 75.

<sup>104</sup> Holman, *Print for victory*, p. 53.

‘boasted a library of four thousand volumes serving six thousand borrowers.’<sup>105</sup> Concerted arrangements on the part of government and publishers also ensured that servicemen, the wounded and prisoners-of-war were also supplied with reading matter.<sup>106</sup> As Holman judges, ‘[t]hrough the vast network of camp libraries and book distribution schemes, many servicemen were introduced to literature and reading for the first time’.<sup>107</sup>

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## II – 1945-1979

### *Surveying the post-war (non)-reader*

Although the Second World War is often viewed as marking the arrival of a new and hungry reading public, immediate post-war investigations into reading habits suggested that older trends endured. In 1946 Mass-Observation undertook a survey of reading and book ownership, drawing on interviews with 1000 members of the public as well as investigations into retail outlets, libraries, and homes. Undertaken two years after the 1944 Education Act, which introduced compulsory free secondary education for all, and the year after the election of a Labour Government committed to the introduction of a welfare state, the social concerns of the period were strongly evident in the survey’s summary finding that ‘at the heart of the potential reading public, there is a core of the illiterate, the indifferent and the antagonistic’, indifference and antagonism being ‘found chiefly among unskilled working class people and, more commonly, among the over-forties’.<sup>108</sup> Postwar debates about reading were strongly inflected by a discourse of social welfare and educational provision, reflective of wider debates about the role of the state in the provision of culture and entertainment. As public library usage continued to grow, librarians agonised over how to reconcile the educative ideals of the movement with the overwhelming demand for ‘recreational’ reading. The expansion of further and higher education in the 1950s and 1960s increased the appetite for instructional reading, but at the same time the impact of radio and television heightened fears that other forms of entertainment were reducing the reading habit.

Although the main purpose of the 1946 Mass-Observation survey was to assess the impact on the reading public of Penguin paperbacks, the report produced general findings about the habits of readers and non-readers. Reading was found to be the favourite leisure pursuit of just one-sixth of the population. While only three per cent of respondents declared that they never read anything at all (an unreliable guide in view of the stigma attached to such an admission), thirty-four per cent never read books. The report put the total book-reading public – those for whom book-reading was ‘an accepted habit’<sup>109</sup> – at fifty-one per cent, but it was a public sharply defined by educational and class difference. Forty-four per cent of unskilled workers and twenty-nine per cent of the skilled working classes did not read books, compared to only seven per cent of middle-class people; and book readers were ‘almost twice as likely to have had a secondary as an elementary education’.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>106</sup> See Chapter 23.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>108</sup> Mass-Observation, *A report*, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 17. The survey used the NRS social grade system for classifying class groups: ‘B’ represented middle class occupations; ‘C’ lower-middle and skilled manual workers; ‘D’ unskilled manual workers.

The most common reason for not reading books was lack of time, followed by fatigue, lack of interest, bad eye-sight, and an inability to read well. Unsurprisingly, working-class readers were most likely to complain about a lack of time for reading, and long working hours no doubt contributed to the finding that an 'inability' or 'lack of desire' to 'concentrate' was 'a very real reason' for not reading.<sup>111</sup> Acquisition of books was also characterised by class trends. Book-buying was significantly greater among the higher-education groups, with those of lower educational attainment more likely to borrow from libraries or from friends.

In 1950 a different survey was undertaken in three London boroughs – Bermondsey, Tottenham and Wandsworth.<sup>112</sup> With a small sample of just over 500 respondents, the survey was designed principally as an exercise in statistical method. It nevertheless produced a strikingly detailed analysis of the tastes and demand for different kinds of books among different class, gender, and educational groups. Fiction remained by far the most popular reading matter, accounting for two-thirds of the books currently being read by respondents. Detective and mystery stories were the most popular genre overall, with sixty-six per cent of men and forty-nine per cent of women reporting a 'special interest'. Education was a strong marker of taste, with those with higher levels 'significantly less interested in detective, mystery, adventure, Western, love and happy-ending stories, and more interested in novels about political and similar problems, character and psychological stories, and, particularly, historical stories.'<sup>113</sup> Non-fiction books were also read more extensively by those educated beyond elementary levels. When confronted with eighteen different subject areas the trends were even more distinct. Very few men read anything about 'running a house'; very few women reported an interest in 'politics and economics', 'problems with our society', or 'sport and recreation'. Perhaps the most revealing statistic was that while only 2.5 per cent of women expressed particular interest in 'scientific and technical books to do with your job or hobbies', compared to 16.5 per cent of men, the figures were higher and the trend reversed for 'scientific and technical books *not* to do with your job or hobbies', a clear reflection of employment demographics in the period.

The survey made little attempt to account for these trends. Although it reported that over eighty per cent of reading was done in the home, the importance of different reading spaces and environments, for example, was not otherwise considered. Evidence in the Mass-Observation report, however, suggest that personal taste was not the only contributing factor in determining choice of reading. When asked why they read, men were more likely to stress 'the educational side of their reading' and women more inclined to say that they 'read for pleasure.'<sup>114</sup> Reading among men emerged as a more active pursuit, whereas women more commonly stressed it as a means of escapism. It was also noticeable that both occupied and unoccupied women were the most 'time-conscious' about reading as an activity. Women were 'over three times as likely as men' to say that they had no time for reading, reflective, perhaps, of a less clearly-marked distinction between work and leisure.<sup>115</sup>

Revealingly, both surveys indicated that *book* reading was more prevalent among younger age groups. Mass-Observation found that fifty-six per cent of people over forty did not read books compared to forty-two per cent of those aged between twenty-one and forty and only twenty per cent aged between sixteen and twenty.<sup>116</sup> While reading for educational

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>112</sup> Stuart, 'Reading habits'.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>114</sup> Mass-Observation, *A report*, p. 30.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>116</sup> In the London survey the figures were comparable: fifty-nine per cent of respondents aged over fifty never read books compared to less than twenty-five per cent aged under thirty.

purposes might in part account for these figures, they do suggest an emerging generational shift with those born after 1918 much more likely to read books than their parents and grandparents. It was significant, too, that it was 'the younger generation of working class men' who most conveyed a conscious 'striving after knowledge through books', more so than older groups and working class women.<sup>117</sup>

It would be tempting to link these findings with the arrival of Penguin paperbacks in 1935. For many commentators the immediate success of Penguin signalled the emergence of a new reading public. In 1938 Margaret Cole concluded her Hogarth Press pamphlet *Books and the people* with the words: 'there *is* a new public, a vast new public', one that had hitherto been 'affected by the snobbery about books and reading' and, in possession of only 'very low incomes and pensions', had been unable to 'afford anything more than 6d for a book'.<sup>118</sup> Mass-Observation suggested, however, that the Penguin public consisted chiefly of those already buying and reading the most books. Among existing book readers, forty-one per cent of the middle classes read Penguins, compared to seventeen per cent of the artisan classes, and only eight per cent of the working classes. Readers with secondary education were five times as likely to read Penguins as those with elementary education only.<sup>119</sup> Statistics were even more marked for the non-fiction Pelican volumes. Secondary education was found to influence Pelican reading 'even more decisively' than Penguin reading, with only two per cent of book readers with elementary education reading Pelicans.<sup>120</sup> Buying Pelicans was 'very largely a middle class habit', with working class readers apparently not buying them at all, and artisan classes 'only rarely'.<sup>121</sup>

Rather than opening up a new reading public, then, Penguins and Pelicans were filtering off the public that was already reading, borrowing and buying the most books. Typical Penguin buyers read and bought more books generally; they kept more books in the home and were less inclined than non-Penguin readers to sell, exchange or give them away; they were more conscious of the value of reading and 'more likely to believe that their ideas and opinions [had] been affected by the books they read'.<sup>122</sup> They were also more likely than non-Penguin readers to belong to public and subscription libraries and to consider reading their favourite leisure activity. What Penguins had done, however, was engender a new attitude of adventurousness towards books. Readers were reportedly more willing to experiment with new authors and new subjects when parting only with sixpence. Compared to hardbacks, which readers looked upon as books to re-read and to keep permanently, the purchase of paperbacks was 'something essentially more casual'.<sup>123</sup> With hardbacks the buying process was often begun 'long before the bookshop is entered'. Paperbacks, by contrast, were frequently bought on impulse: 'people tend far more often to go to the bookshop with no particular book in mind – often to have a look at the new Penguins – look through the stock, and select a book which interests them.' When purchasing from railway stalls, in particular, readers – and especially women – were more likely to buy 'on sight' and to come away with titles they had 'no intention of buying'.<sup>124</sup>

These attitudes to buying influenced trends in book ownership. Home libraries were still more likely to consist of hardbacks and reference volumes. The survey concluded that

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<sup>117</sup> Mass-Observation, *A report*, pp. 32-3.

<sup>118</sup> Cole, *Books and the people*, p. 38.

<sup>119</sup> Mass-Observation, *A report*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

'ownership of paper covered books is, for 89 per cent of working class people, 74 per cent of artisan class and 51 per cent of middle class people essentially a casual kind of ownership. These people give away, exchange or throw away their books when they have read them.'<sup>125</sup> In 'average working class and artisan households', Penguins and paper-covered books were 'heavily outnumbered by cloth books', many of which had been passed down through generations or acquired as gifts.<sup>126</sup> Most artisan households contained a 'skeleton' library consisting of 'a few essential reference books', some 'light' fiction, and 'a little non-fiction', but 'feelings of possessiveness and delight in the acquisition of books' and the 'systematic planning' of home libraries was found to be the preserve of the middle classes. Lack of space and 'proper' bookcases and shelving meant that in working-class households books were often found on sideboards or dressers and, more commonly 'shared and passed round from household to household, without anyone expecting their return.'<sup>127</sup> Fiction was most frequently passed on, with some 'more serious' books kept for reference.<sup>128</sup>

Later surveys undertaken in the 1960s gave some insight into daily patterns of reading.<sup>129</sup> Unsurprisingly, most reading was done during evenings and at weekends. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents to a 1965 survey reported that they read in the evenings and at night, with a notably high proportion coming from the lower socio-economic groups and those aged between thirty and forty-four. More weekend reading was undertaken by those in higher socio-economic groups, while the youngest age group of sixteen to twenty-nine were the most likely to read while travelling. A different survey from 1962 reported that, on average, the public spent just thirty minutes reading out of a total of nine hours eighteen minutes of waking time spent at home on weekdays. As with surveys from the 1950s, women were reported as reading for less time – twenty-two minutes on average compared to forty-five for men. Those aged fifty-five and over spent on average three times as much reading as the youngest age group, sixteen to twenty-four.

### *Newspaper reading*

In contrast to books, newspaper reading was part of the everyday life of the nation. Mass-Observation produced an additional report in 1949, *The press and its readers*, drawing both on its own investigations and on the annual Hulton surveys of newspaper reading begun in 1947.<sup>130</sup> The findings showed that daily newspapers were read by all but thirteen per cent of the population, and Sunday papers by all but eight per cent.<sup>131</sup> Newspaper reading was more common among men, younger people, and the middle and artisan classes than among women, older people and the working classes. Men not only read newspapers more often than women, they also read them for longer, and were more likely to read 'most' of the paper, rather than just 'glance at the headlines' or read only 'some' of it. Leading articles and, in particular, sport were much more popular among men, with only the Letters section liked significantly more by women. Book reading and newspaper reading could sometimes be mutually exclusive. Some working-class readers reported that time spent reading newspapers restricted

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>129</sup> Information in this paragraph is drawn from the research notes of Peter H. Mann, preserved in the Mills & Boon archive, University of Reading Library, MB ADM/4/1.

<sup>130</sup> The Hulton readership Surveys ran until 1956 when they were succeeded by the National Readership Surveys.

<sup>131</sup> [Mass-Observation], *The press and its readers*, p. 12.



the opportunity to read books, and marriage was found to decrease book-reading (among both men and women) as it increased the tendency to read newspapers.

Bare statistics tell us little about actual reading experiences, but the report made some attempt to observe readers in different environments, showing how newspapers were put to varied reading use. In libraries, where readers were more likely to consult the 'Situations Vacant' columns, the average reader spent just four to five minutes on each daily paper read; in trains and buses the average was six minutes in the morning and eight in the evening. Most of the time was spent reading the front page news, though often this amounted only to 'the briefest headline reading'. The report concluded ruefully that, 'although the majority of people look at the political news, it is only to glance at it'.<sup>132</sup>

The newspaper industry was, of course, extremely diverse, and the loose formulation 'newspaper reading' disguises considerable variety in reading material. Daily papers ranged from those like the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* with small readerships and a 'pronounced emphasis on the older and higher income groups' to the 'picture papers' – the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Graphic* – whose predominantly working-class readership was least interested in 'serious news'.<sup>133</sup> Although readerships of some papers were fairly evenly distributed among different income groups, choice of paper was in general strongly influenced by class, income and political outlook. This inevitably influenced what people actually read. Concentration on news items was found to increase with educational level, the 'less well-educated' spending more time on pictures and gossip.'<sup>134</sup> Conversely, readers of the 'picture papers' were least interested in editorials and political news and the most likely to read comics and cartoons.<sup>135</sup>

Sunday papers were more widely read than dailies. Scarcity of time during the working week was suggested as one reason for the greater popularity, but they were also consumed for different purposes. Whereas dailies (more likely to be bought by 'the better-off') were read by those wanting 'more serious news', the main attraction of the Sunday papers was 'feature and gossip'.<sup>136</sup> Sunday newspaper reading was found to be more casual, 'not only at all sorts of odd times of the day, but also with a feeling of relaxation rather than of duty'.<sup>137</sup> By 1953 it was reported that two out of every three adults read more than one Sunday paper. The most popular of all, the *News of the World*, had a circulation of over eight million in 1950 and was read by every second adult.<sup>138</sup> Found to be 'especially popular amongst people of the unskilled working classes', the luring attraction of crime and sensation was directly referenced by George Orwell in his essay 'The decline of the English murder' (1946).

### *A view of reading in the 1950s*

The readership of newspapers – especially Sunday newspapers – was a *leitmotiv* of Richard Hoggart's widely reprinted study of working-class culture and entertainment, *The uses of literacy* (1957).<sup>139</sup> For Hoggart 'the Sunday smell of the *News of the World*-mingled-with-

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>133</sup> For a summary of the newspapers published at the time of the survey, see *ibid.*, pp. 110-17.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>139</sup> In its Pelican edition (first published in 1958), the book was reprinted eight times during the 1960s. See also Chapter 25.

roast-beef' was one of the recognizable details of working-class domestic life.<sup>140</sup>

Impressionistic in its perception and use of sources, *The uses of literacy* was more a study of popular cultural products than reading and readers. It nevertheless illustrates how views of reading habits in the 1950s reflected wider preoccupations with social welfare, commerce, and common culture.

As both Collini and Hilliard have argued, *The uses of literacy* was a book deeply influenced by F.R. Leavis and the *Scrutiny* movement.<sup>141</sup> Hoggart's concern was not the lack of reading – he drew attention, for example, to surveys that indicated book reading was more widespread in the UK than in the USA and Sweden<sup>142</sup> – but the lack of intelligent reading. Like Q.D. Leavis, Hoggart sought reasons in the commercial structures of publishing. The 'popular Press', he argued, imposed a narrow uniformity and restricted access to culture. Newspapers and magazines had become 'the products of large-scale commercial organizations' which worked 'to ensure that their customers want no other reading ... millions each week and each day see the same paper and see few other publications.'<sup>143</sup> In addition to the sensational Sunday papers, Hoggart referenced the picture dailies; threepenny story magazines for 'adolescent girls and unmarried women'; and the crime, science fiction, and "blood and guts" sex novelettes that filled magazine shops found in 'every large working-class shopping-area'.<sup>144</sup> The overwhelming characteristic of this literature was 'fragmentation' and 'bittiness': newspapers and magazines, for example, were filled with short, unconnected anecdotes that could be consumed 'in a very easy gear', and 'one minute stories' that kept reading at 'the two- or three-syllabled word and the seven-word-sentence level'.<sup>145</sup> Such publications belonged solely to the sphere of 'entertainment'. They held down taste and kept readers at a level of 'passive acceptance'.<sup>146</sup>

As has been argued, *The uses of literacy* was 'a book that spoke to, and was shaped by, the adult education movement'.<sup>147</sup> University extra-mural departments and voluntary bodies like the Workers' Educational Association grew substantially after the war, supported by the Labour government. As Hilliard has shown, Hoggart's methods as an extra-mural teacher in Hull after the war were strongly influenced by 'the currency of left-Leavisism' and promoted a discriminating close reading in pursuit of "appreciating real literature".<sup>148</sup> Hoggart the educationalist fundamentally distrusted and dismissed reading for entertainment. He was motivated by a conviction that individuals should 'work on their reading', and that commercialism prevented the working-classes from even recognising this. In language strongly reminiscent of Q.D. Leavis, he concluded his sketch of popular publications by arguing: 'purely on this evidence, the situation looks dreadful: sensation, fragmentation, over-simplification, unreality; "never a real or a good thing read", to paraphrase D.H. Lawrence.'<sup>149</sup> Hoggart's conclusions were nevertheless less hyperbolic and pessimistic than *Fiction and the reading public*. Hilliard has persuasively argued that his critical procedure differed from Leavis's.<sup>150</sup> Writing post-Penguin Hoggart could not avoid pointing to the

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<sup>140</sup> Hoggart, *The uses of literacy*, p. 39.

<sup>141</sup> Collini, 'Richard Hoggart'; Hilliard, *English as a vocation*, chapter 5.

<sup>142</sup> Hoggart, *The uses of literacy*, p. 332.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 242, 237, 243.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257, 122, 250.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242, 237.

<sup>147</sup> Hilliard, *English as a vocation*, p. 166.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166

<sup>149</sup> Hoggart, *The uses of literacy*, p. 240. Emphasis added.

<sup>150</sup> Hilliard, *English as a vocation*, p. 167.

availability of cheap quality books to the ‘earnest minority’ of working-class readers, in addition to the promotion of educative reading via the expansion of adult education. Furthermore, there was already evidence that the very divisions in culture and reading practices he detected were changing and narrowing. That ‘blood-and-guts’ novelettes and ‘sex-books’ mingled with Penguins and Pelicans and “hobbies” and “handicrafts” magazines’ on railway-bookstalls suggested a less atomised reading culture, and that the former was ‘ceasing to be even slightly furtive reading.’<sup>151</sup>

One successful publication which demonstrated Hoggart’s point about the popularity of ‘fragmented’ reading was the *Reader’s Digest* magazine. Founded in the US in 1922, *Reader’s Digest* contained article-length excerpts from new books and special book features. International sales of the magazine expanded in the late 1930s when the Readers Digest Association began soliciting material from British publishers. In 1939 the new London office reported to Allen & Unwin a ‘substantially increased sale’ in Britain ‘during the past year’,<sup>152</sup> and a separate British edition soon appeared. By 1962 *Reader’s Digest* was claiming in its advertisements and on the cover of its magazine UK sales of 1.25 million and an actual readership of eight million.

The ‘bittiness’ of the *Reader’s Digest* magazine extended to many of the company’s book publications. Reader’s Digest Condensed Books were introduced in the UK in 1954. The previous year the New York editorial office had sent a report to leading British publishers entitled ‘How The Reader’s Digest Book Condensations Affect Book Sales’, claiming that ‘in many cases, READER’S DIGEST condensations have skyrocketed books to best-sellerdom.’<sup>153</sup> Each condensed book contained three or four works of current fiction or non-fiction in abridged form in 500 pages, issued quarterly, at 10s net, sold principally to subscribers of the magazine. In a memorandum, the publisher Mark Longman noted that Kenneth Wilson, the American organiser of the Condensed Books, ‘admitted that he would never willingly read one himself’ but had explained to Longman ‘very convincingly ... that there was a genuine market for them which was quite different from the ordinary book-reading market.’<sup>154</sup> When the company expanded its book operations in the 1960s, its special brand of condensed and reference reading material – notably the *Reader’s Digest atlas of the world* (first published in 1961) – became a ubiquitous feature of many British households.

Along with the expansion of public libraries and the advance of paperbacks, the impact of *Readers Digest* contributed to the decline of the book clubs which had flourished before the war. The Left Book Club had ceased in 1948 and the Readers Union went into ‘steady decline’ in the 1950s.<sup>155</sup> There remained, however, a number of smaller operations, ‘with memberships ranging from three to ten thousand’, devoted to subjects such as the countryside, gardening, and science.<sup>156</sup> Serving disparate reading communities, usually by mail order, these niche clubs helped promote virtual reading communities around loosely-defined genres of books.

### *The post-war library reader*

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<sup>151</sup> Hoggart, *The uses of literacy*, p. 257.

<sup>152</sup> Reader’s Digest Association to Allen & Unwin, 19 May 1939. Allen & Unwin archive, University of Reading Library. AUC 70/12.

<sup>153</sup> Allen & Unwin archive. AUC, 610/13.

<sup>154</sup> Memo dated 8 March 1954. Longman archive, University of Reading Library. MS 1393/2/265/38.

<sup>155</sup> Baker, *Low cost of bookloving*, p. 24.

<sup>156</sup> Baker, *Book clubs*, p. 122.

In the conclusion to *The uses of literacy*, Hoggart lamented the high percentage of borrowing in public libraries of 'worthless fiction' or non-fictional books that were 'of little value'.<sup>157</sup> The politicised concerns about reading that underpinned his study also informed postwar debates over public library provision. Alistair Black has argued that in this period the public library 'increasingly defined itself, notwithstanding some librarians' suspicion of state planning, less in terms of civic society and more according to the principles of welfarism'.<sup>158</sup> In 1942 Lionel McColvin produced a report for the Library Association which conceived of libraries as 'a great instrument and bulwark of democracy'.<sup>159</sup> McColvin became a leading spokesman for the idealistic vision of public libraries after the war, confidently predicting in 1950 that the service would become more 'active' and 'purposive' and less concerned with satisfying 'recreational demand'.<sup>160</sup> Seven years later he reiterated his conviction that public libraries 'can afford to neglect the books readily available in commercial libraries and in cheap editions'.<sup>161</sup> However, the overwhelming demand for 'recreational' reading meant that debates in this period repeatedly returned to the public library's role in the shaping of reading tastes.

Until the spending cuts of the 1970s and 1980s severely reduced expenditure, the public library service enjoyed continued expansion after the war. Between 1949 and 1959 the number of service points rose from 23,000 to 34,000, and volumes in stock increased from forty-two million to seventy-one million.<sup>162</sup> Membership remained around one quarter of the national population throughout the 1950s but increased markedly in the 1960s with the growth in higher education. By 1964 the number of registered users was over thirteen million, compared to two-and-a-half million in 1924.<sup>163</sup> Total book issues doubled from 300 million in the 1950s to 600 million by 1968-9.<sup>164</sup>

The most notable area of expansion was in branch services. In the county service the number of branch libraries almost trebled in the twenty years after the war. As one librarian wrote in the *Times* in 1956, 'there are few villages, nowadays, which are not within easy reach of a branch of the County Libraries system'.<sup>165</sup> Mobile services also increased, bringing books closer to people in both rural areas and the new suburban housing developments. In 1949 fourteen authorities were known to use mobile libraries, carrying about 2000 books and visiting each site once a week; by 1960 there were over 270 such libraries in the country.<sup>166</sup> Surveys undertaken over 1971-72 found that the mobile service was used overwhelmingly more by women – 'housewives' – than men, and was especially important for older readers: twenty-eight per cent of mobile library users were aged sixty-five or over, compared to fourteen per cent of 'static' library users.<sup>167</sup>

In the immediate post-war period, there was evidence that tastes in library borrowing, and thus reading, were becoming more diverse. Readership surveys from provincial towns and cities revealed significant increases in the borrowing of non-fiction. One librarian in 1952

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<sup>157</sup> Hoggart, *The uses of literacy*, pp. 332-3.

<sup>158</sup> Black, *The public library*, p. 111.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>160</sup> Quoted in Kelly, *A history*, p. 380.

<sup>161</sup> McColvin, 'Public, national and other libraries', p. 169.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>163</sup> Groombridge, *The Londoner*, p. 87.

<sup>164</sup> See the annual *Statistics of public (rate supported) libraries in Great Britain and Northern Ireland* published by the Library Association.

<sup>165</sup> 'Realism about readers', *Times* 21 August 1956, p. 9.

<sup>166</sup> Kelly, *A history*, p. 362.

<sup>167</sup> *Public libraries and their use*, p. 26.

observed an ‘astonish[ing]’ demand for ‘highly specialized knowledge of technical literature to do with hobbies such as radio and photography, and a more advanced level of reading among women ‘in the literature of childcare, management and psychology.’<sup>168</sup> The library in Stockport reported a 222 per cent increase in issues of science books over 1936-56.<sup>169</sup> These trends coincided with increased expenditure on commercial and technical departments to support local industries, ‘a reflection of the public library’s commitment to economic modernisation’.<sup>170</sup> The most popular non-fiction subjects throughout the period, however, were travel, biography and history.<sup>171</sup>

The spread of higher and further education in the 1960s had a major impact on library borrowing and reading habits. In the twenty years following the war, the number of university students rose from 52,000 to 113,000 and those in further education (excluding teachers in training) from 54,000 to 202,000.<sup>172</sup> The significance of this enlarged reading group is witnessed by a survey at Manchester Central Library in 1964, which showed that on a single day 1,450 out of 3,681 users were students.<sup>173</sup> Such a statistic tells us little about actual reading habits – many students would use the library simply as a place to work – but expansion of education undoubtedly brought ‘an enormously increased demand for reference and study books.’<sup>174</sup> A 1966 study of thirty-three reference departments found that students made up fifty-three per cent of all users. Another survey showed that students spent twice as long in the library as adults generally.<sup>175</sup>

In spite of these developments, public libraries remained predominantly a vessel for the consumption of fiction. In March 1947, the county of Middlesex undertook a survey of public library usage on one sample day. 84,000 volumes out of a total stock of 173,000 were out on loan, of which 60.7 per cent were fiction. The fiction volumes were broken down into eleven categories, with romance (26.2 per cent) the most popular. In 1957, in Keighley, West Yorkshire, fiction was reported to account for seventy-five per cent of loans, in spite of efforts to boost ‘serious’ reading by giving readers an additional non-fiction only ticket.<sup>176</sup> With continued demand for popular genres in particular, there was a revival of ‘the old and sterile controversy about the provision of fiction’.<sup>177</sup> The debate turned on how far public libraries were responding to demand and how far they were responsible for perpetuating it. In August 1956 the *Times* ran an article by a librarian which cautioned against the assumption that increased library borrowing meant ‘the public are becoming more intelligent [and] more conscious of the cultural (in its broadest sense) value of reading.’<sup>178</sup> The librarian reported that approximately two-thirds of books borrowed from public libraries were fiction, and with greater organisation of books by genre, readers were making selections by ‘kind’ and at random, rather than by ‘any of the recognized literary standards’. Predictably, the article drew much correspondence, the debate again raising the dilemma of how public libraries could marry an idealist ethos with what one correspondent called ‘the constant vocal pressure of a

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<sup>168</sup> ‘The reading tastes of the “under forties”, *Times* 29 August 1952, p. 7.

<sup>169</sup> Kelly, *A history*, p. 384.

<sup>170</sup> Black, *The public library*, p. 121.

<sup>171</sup> See Ward, *Readers and library users*.

<sup>172</sup> Kelly, *A history*, p. 343.

<sup>173</sup> Luckham, *The library in society*, p. 56.

<sup>174</sup> Kelly, *A history*, p. 371.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434; Luckham, *The library in society*, p. 113.

<sup>176</sup> Kelly, *A history*, p. 125.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>178</sup> ‘Realism about readers’, *Times* 21 August 1956, p. 9.

body of ratepayers crying, one might say quite literally, for blood'.<sup>179</sup> In a leader the *Times* questioned why libraries supplied light fiction at all: 'No one expects the local council to supply him with free sweets or tobacco', a view which demonstrated how far these debates were embedded in a welfare-state discourse.<sup>180</sup> Later surveys recorded a continued demand for fiction. In a 1971-2 report, it was estimated that two-thirds of all adult library users who were borrowing books for themselves were looking 'for any novel of interest'.<sup>181</sup>

For all the civic expansion, usage of public libraries continued to be disproportionately middle class in character. Surveys undertaken in London in 1959 and 1962 suggested that 'nearly half the adult population'<sup>182</sup> had never been enrolled in a public library anywhere, and a more extensive study of seven London boroughs undertaken in 1962-63 by the Research Institute for Consumer Affairs (RICA) reached a similar conclusion. From a sample of 1,306 adult Londoners, 593 (forty-six per cent) had never been members while 317 had allowed their membership to lapse.<sup>183</sup> While total membership was spread fairly evenly across the different occupational groups, this did not correspond with relative numbers in the population as a whole. Non-members were more likely to belong to 'the three least skilled occupational groups'<sup>184</sup> while members of the three highest socio-economic groups, which constituted just seventeen per cent of the population, accounted for 45.8 per cent of library membership. Educational background and attainment was also a strong indicator of usage. The survey concluded that people were 'more likely to join a public library, at some time in their lives, if they stay on longer at school or in full-time education' or if they attend 'a grammar-type or public school'.<sup>185</sup>

Surveys throughout the period and in different geographical areas produced comparable trends.<sup>186</sup> In the 1970s commentators were still concluding that, while the public library captured 'a broader social cross-section of the general public than the bookshop', it 'still does not get very far with the bulk of the ordinary manual occupations.'<sup>187</sup> The 1970s was a decade of intense analysis of public library usage, much of it government sponsored, and everywhere the findings were the same: library users were 'more than proportionately drawn from persons with extended education, non-manual occupations and younger in age.'<sup>188</sup> One report from 1978 found that while the middle classes made up less than twenty per cent of the population, they accounted for fifty per cent of library membership.<sup>189</sup>

Of course membership or non-membership of a library does not automatically correspond with usage or non-usage. But the 1962-63 RICA survey found that only twenty-eight per cent of members reported visiting a library once a week, and that 'the great majority' of non-members made no use at all of public library facilities, although some (around fifteen per cent) read books borrowed by other people.<sup>190</sup> Over a third of respondents agreed with the suggestion that they preferred doing other things with their time, and newspapers and magazines continued to be the sole reading of many. In all the surveys

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<sup>179</sup> Letters, *Times* 28 August 1956, p. 9.

<sup>180</sup> Leader, *Times* 28 August 1956, p. 9.

<sup>181</sup> *Public libraries and their use*, p. 21.

<sup>182</sup> Groombridge, *The Londoner*, p. 21.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 43, 110.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>186</sup> See Kelly, *A history*, p. 385; Ward, *Readers and library users*.

<sup>187</sup> Mann, *Books: buyers and borrowers*, p. 147.

<sup>188</sup> Luckham, *The library in society*, p. 24.

<sup>189</sup> Black, *The public library*, p. 147.

<sup>190</sup> Groombridge, *The Londoner*, pp. 23-4.

conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, lack of time was the main reason given for not joining or using a public library. Lapsed membership was often attributed to moving home or getting married (among both men and women), but most commonly it was prompted by leaving education. A series of surveys in the North West of England undertaken over 1964-69 found 'no one who had joined a library for the first time after normal school-age.'<sup>191</sup> Once beyond school, the lives of many adults were bookless.

With the expansion of public libraries, subscription libraries went into decline in the post-war period. The two largest, W.H. Smith's and Boots, closed in 1961 and 1966 respectively. The subscription library reader did not disappear altogether, however. Some smaller ventures struggled on into the 1970s. The Manchester-based Allied Libraries continued to supply small shopkeepers (mostly newsagents) with lending stock (mostly fiction) until 1975,<sup>192</sup> and another wholesaling firm, South Counties Libraries, based in Bath, was still operating in 1981. At its peak after the war, this consortium of suppliers had 'an estimated six or seven thousand agents', which had declined to 'eleven or twelve hundred' in the 1960s and just 150 in 1978.<sup>193</sup> Over half of the agents were newsagents and confectioners, with post offices, food and general stores, and wool shops and hairdressers making up the rest. The 'vast majority' of the books loaned were 'light fiction' with Mills & Boon and Robert Hale the largest suppliers. The clientele was mostly female and in the upper age groups, and an investigation into sample libraries in 1978 found that membership could still reach as many as 900 registered borrowers, with anything from fifteen to 300 'fairly regular' users.<sup>194</sup> Distance from a public library was cited as the main reason why readers preferred to acquire their reading from rental libraries, but these small establishments also served specialist reading groups: a haberdashers in Southsea had 'a constantly changing naval clientele', while a bookshop in Worthing rented books to holidaymakers.<sup>195</sup>

### ***Reading and the impact of radio and television***

In the postwar period in particular, the spread of radio, cinema, and television proved an important influence on the printed word, serving both to challenge and to stimulate reading as a leisure activity.<sup>196</sup> The first publication of *Radio Times* in 1923 demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between sound or visual media and print. Initially a joint venture between the BBC and the publisher Newnes (the operation became entirely in-house in 1937), *Radio Times* combined radio and later television listings (initially occupying just two pages at the back of the magazine) with articles, special features, and high-quality illustrations. Competition arrived in 1955 with the launch of Independent Television (ITV) and the rival *TV Times*.<sup>197</sup>

Another long-standing print publication inspired by radio was the *Listener*, a weekly magazine established by the BBC in 1929. Developed mainly as 'a medium of record for the reproduction of broadcast talks', the magazine also previewed broadcasts and reviewed new books.<sup>198</sup> The cultural pretensions of the magazine were asserted on the front cover of the first issue, declaring the *Listener* to be 'a medium for the intelligent reception of broadcast programmes by way of amplification and explanation of those features which cannot now be

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<sup>191</sup> Luckham, *The library in society*, p. 45.

<sup>192</sup> Long, 'The commercial circulating library', p. 187.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>196</sup> See Chapter 14.

<sup>197</sup> See Currie, *The Radio Times story*.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

dealt with in the editorial columns of the “Radio Times”.<sup>199</sup> The *Listener* ceased publication in 1991.

The postwar expansion of radio and television was generally seen as providing a stimulus to reading rather than a threat. A librarian writing in the *Times* in 1952 reported that ‘the ‘very great popularity’ of the book review programme, “Books by the Fire” had proved an ‘effective means of stimulating demand for books’ among younger readers.’<sup>200</sup> In the early 1950s the BBC undertook a series of experiments to determine the effects of radio serials on subsequent buying and borrowing. The findings showed convincingly that broadcasting boosted reading, especially of ‘classic’ works. Out of a sample of nearly half a million, ninety per cent of readers attributed borrowing of serialised books entirely to broadcasts.<sup>201</sup> Weekly demand for Trollope’s *The last chronicle of Barset* increased by sixty per cent during its eleven week serialisation on Sunday evenings, and Cecil Day Lewis’s translation of the *Aeneid* ‘produced a demand for the book far exceeding that previously recorded for all other translations put together.’<sup>202</sup> Another survey assessed the effects of television, revealing only ‘a slight shift in habit’ with a small percentage of viewers reporting that their reading had declined as a result of acquiring a television set.<sup>203</sup> These findings led Joseph Trenaman to conclude in 1957 ‘[t]here is as yet no serious threat to reading.’<sup>204</sup>

In the 1960s, however, the spread of television provoked concerns over the decline of reading as a leisure pursuit. The number of television licence holders doubled from 6.4 million in 1954 to 12.8 million in 1964,<sup>205</sup> and while the 1962-63 RICA survey had found television to have negligible effect on public library use – only three per cent of respondents mentioned it as a reason for having ceased to use the library<sup>206</sup> – by the end of the decade the picture had changed. A 1968 survey showed that while radio and television could stimulate those already reading, it had no effect on increasing the size of the reading public as a whole.<sup>207</sup> As public library borrowing rates dropped in the 1970s, a sample survey of urban areas from 1973 showed that ‘watching television’ was the most popular leisure activity followed by ‘reading newspapers’ and ‘relaxing, with ‘reading books’ trailing in in seventh.<sup>208</sup> In general, evidence suggested that while few existing readers were drawn away from reading by the lure of television, those who watched most television were also those who read least.

### *A view of reading in the 1960s and 1970s*

Academic investigations into books and reading took a different turn in the 1960s with the expansion of Higher Education research. Assisted by a grant from the Booksellers Association, the sociologist Peter Mann undertook a series of investigations at the end of the decade into ‘social aspects of book reading’. Mann evolved a sociological model for reading built around a ‘work-leisure continuum’, dividing reading into three main categories: ‘utilitarian’, ‘social’ and ‘personal’.<sup>209</sup> The categories could never be discrete but Mann’s aim

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<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> ‘The reading tastes of the “under forties”’, *Times* 29 August 1952, p. 7.

<sup>201</sup> Ward, *Readers and library users*, p. 24.

<sup>202</sup> Trenaman, *Books, radio and television*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>205</sup> Black, *The public library*, p. 127.

<sup>206</sup> Goodbridge, *The Londoner*, p. 62.

<sup>207</sup> Ward, *Readers and library users*, p. 24.

<sup>208</sup> Kelly, *A history*, p. 436.

<sup>209</sup> See Mann, *Books, buyers and borrowers*, p. 9.



was to use them to distinguish the ‘general functions’ of books and assess how readers ‘actually *use*’ them.<sup>210</sup>

‘Utilitarian’ reading, at the extreme ‘work’ end of the continuum, involved the use of books for their relevance to other interests and purposes. This encompassed books used in the workplace (textbooks, manuals and reference volumes) and in the home (e.g. cookery books, car manuals, and books on hobbies). Such reading satisfied extrinsic interests and purposes, although sometimes in the case of books on particular hobbies (which reached over to the ‘leisure’ end of the continuum) it might lead to the building up of personal libraries with an intrinsic value of their own. Since such books needed to be close at hand, they were more likely to be bought than borrowed. They were also popular as gifts, and Mann’s investigations demonstrated how often book tokens were used to acquire such reading, particularly student textbooks.<sup>211</sup>

‘Social’ reading involved books upon which value or status had been conferred by ‘opinion leaders’, for example newspaper reviews. Such reading involved a conscious element of ‘self-improvement’ and a greater readiness on the part of readers to have their attitudes or beliefs challenged. Because books of this kind had been identified as ‘important’ or ‘serious’ by social forces they were more likely to be kept and re-read, and to be given as a ‘status present’. By contrast, personal reading, at the extreme ‘leisure’ end of the continuum, was characterised as reading for ‘distraction’, and typically involved genre fiction (romance, mystery, detective), paperbacks that were bought and sometimes thrown away, or borrowed from friends. These books were rarely given as gifts since they did not confer status on the giver or receiver, and were likely to be read only once. Importantly, such reading was undertaken not to challenge a reader’s attitudes or beliefs’ but to have them reinforced.

Mann emphasised that his work-leisure distinction was ‘at best, merely a helpful device for setting up polar types which allow for considerable overlap between them.’<sup>212</sup> It nevertheless offered a useful model for understanding how readers might use different books for different purposes, especially when considering personal reading. His extensive study of the ‘romantic’ novel demonstrated the importance of evaluating different *kinds of reading* rather than *kinds of readers*. The function of such fiction was intrinsic rather than extrinsic – to give pleasure ‘at the time of reading’ and not for any external reason such as the conferral of status or the extension of knowledge. The actual reading experience was thus likely to be different from the experience of reading a book which social forces had conditioned a reader into thinking he or she *ought* to read for self-improvement, or which was being read for strictly educational or occupational purposes.

Mann produced two reports on romance reading, in 1969 and 1974. For the initial survey, questionnaires were distributed to over 9,000 readers who regularly received the Mills & Boon romance catalogue, and Mann’s report was based on 2,788 replies. Analysis of age, occupational and educational trends showed that there was no typical Mills & Boon reader, and that the books were read by a cross-section of society. The myth that romance appealed only to ‘factory girls’ or ‘ancient spinsters’ was exploded. The results gave ‘a fairly “flat” age distribution, with proportions above the national average in the age groups between 25 and 54’.<sup>213</sup> One-sixth of the sample had experienced further or higher education, and among employed women the most common occupations were office or clerical jobs. Romance readers were also surprisingly eclectic in their reading tastes and leisure activities as a whole. Newspapers that were more popular with female romance readers than women

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<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. (Original emphasis).

<sup>211</sup> Mann, *Books and reading*, p. 60.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

readers as a whole included several of the more ‘serious’ titles such as the *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Telegraph*. Conversely, the *News of the World* was conspicuously less popular compared to the national average.<sup>214</sup> Mann was also surprised to find that twenty-one per cent of the sample said that they viewed television “not very much” or “never”, which seems quite a high proportion.<sup>215</sup>

What was really important about Mann’s research was how it suggested that romance fiction was more about the *experience* of reading than about reading *tastes*. Although one married woman with a job as a bookseller considered the books ‘most educative’, and believed that they were capable of reaching ‘a more intellectual audience’,<sup>216</sup> romance reading more commonly emerged as a therapeutic activity undertaken in the evening after work or domestic duties had been completed. A housewife undertaking adult education claimed the books were her ‘only means of relaxation’; another with children and a part-time job described them as ‘an excellent vehicle for forgetting the strains of modern living’.<sup>217</sup> Women pursuing high-level careers were also reporting a desire for the same reading experience. Mann recorded how a ‘graduate computer programmer’ found the romances ‘excellent relaxation after her day’s work’, and several ‘women who ran businesses of their own expressed similar views’.<sup>218</sup>

The fact that forty-six per cent of respondents claimed to re-read Mills & Boon novels ‘very often’ supported Mann’s claims about the importance of intrinsic reading practices to everyday behaviour.<sup>219</sup> His focus on uncovering different types of reading experience among individual users, and the varied ways in which readers might actually use books, demonstrated the truth underlying an observation in Raymond Williams’s *The long revolution*: ‘I think there are certain circumstances – times of illness, tension, disturbing growth as in adolescence, and simple fatigue after work – which are much too easily overlooked in sweeping condemnations of “reading as an addiction”. I doubt if any educated person has not used books – any books – in this way.’<sup>220</sup> While matters of class, education and politics provided the main lens through which reading habits were assessed and analysed in the post-war period, the unique tastes of individual readers should caution against sweeping generalisations about the habits and practices of the reading public.

[AN]

### III – 1979-present

#### *Readers in the free market*

In 1979, British readers acquired or purchased books and reading matter from a regulated retail market with fixed prices, and through a large network of publicly funded local libraries. By the end of the century, readers enjoyed the benefits of a competitive retail environment for books, with a substantial reduction in ownership costs. At the same time, however, the decline in funding for local libraries significantly reduced free access to reading matter. As such, the closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed an unravelling of many of the

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<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> Mann, *A new survey*, pp. 21.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>218</sup> Mann, *Books: buyers and borrowers*, p. 169.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>220</sup> Williams, *The long revolution*, p. 193.

structures surrounding reading in the earlier years of the century, and would also usher in some of the changes of the twenty-first.

Economic deregulation in the era of Thatcherite Britain were central to these changes. As Chapter 5 charts, the deregulation of the financial markets enabled mergers and acquisitions, conglomeration, cross-media synergies, and encouraged a culture of entrepreneurialism and growth. These led to an increasingly competitive (and increasingly global) literary marketplace, affecting readers in terms of the types of books produced and the manner of their marketing. Concurrent with the conglomeration of publishing houses during the 1980s and 1990s were shifts in the book retail environment. The growth of selling via bookshop chains, supermarkets, US-style 'big-box' bookstores, and, by the end of the twentieth century, online, meant that book consumers were increasingly buying books in different ways to the preceding decades of the century.<sup>221</sup> Readers in the book superstore would encounter in its vast floorspace the 'bookshop as social club', with 'author and discussion events, with musical entertainment, late opening hours, serving food and drink, and holding a range of other stock including newspapers, magazines, stationery, toys, CDs and DVDs'.<sup>222</sup>

The competitive environment of this period led to the demise of the price-fixing Net Book Agreement (NBA) at the end of the 1990s.<sup>223</sup> From the perspective of book consumers, this meant books were then heavily discounted, making them substantially cheaper. Price promotion became the primary book marketing mechanism, ushering in 3-for-2s and similar offers. A book consumer walking into a large chain bookshop would be assailed by discount offers (co-funded by publishers), attractively displayed on front tables, or piled high in dump bins. Massification was not new in the publishing industry (the sales of Penguin Books via Woolworths in the mid-twentieth century was an earlier example), but the abolition of price regulation brought a wholly new emphasis on competition. The impact on book consumers was access to heavily-discounted books sold in large and welcoming spaces.

Prior to the demise of the NBA at the end of the 1990s, the public library offered readers access to otherwise high-cost books for free. The rise of supermarket and discount selling cheapened books, leading to 'people who may have been frequent library users in the past being more able to purchase books', and thus less likely to visit their public library.<sup>224</sup> In the previous decade, public libraries had been defunded during a period of cuts to local government, and had also been confronted with an ideological interrogation of public sector provision. The *Ex Libris* report (1986) from the free-market Adam Smith Institute advocated the extension of competitive tendering into library services, and even paid-for subscription services offering privileged lending rights to those willing to pay for them.<sup>225</sup> The recommendations were not, in the end, taken forwards, but engendered hostility among librarians and – as evidenced via Mass Observation documentation from 1988 – some library users, who were already angry about public library cuts. As one commented, "On the whole, my library withdrawals are merely political acts. I use my library to defend the principle against those philistines in the government who would say that a public library system is not being used by sufficient numbers to warrant public subsidy." Another commented that "Our libraries are our great heritage and I do hope that the Thatcher revolution will not do anything

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<sup>221</sup> See Miller, *Reluctant capitalists*, pp. 117-39; Squires, *Marketing literature*, pp. 27-34.

<sup>222</sup> Leon Kreitzman, 'Shop around the clock', *Bookseller* 26 March 1999, p. 36; Squires, *Marketing literature*, p. 34.

<sup>223</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>224</sup> McMenemy, *The public library*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>225</sup> Snape, 'Libraries for leisure time', p. 54.

to remove universal free libraries.”<sup>226</sup> In his analysis of the Mass-Observation archive Alistair Black also noted an opposing distaste of public libraries becoming politicised. One correspondent, ‘commenting on the libraries run by the radical council in his area of London [in the late 1980s], wrote that librarians selected “too many feminist and pseudo psychology books [...] the place is plastered with leaflets on people’s rights, etc., and campaigning-type posters. On the counter there is always some petition they want you to sign—Sign of the times I suppose.”’<sup>227</sup> The public library’s increasing transition into community hub was both a politicised act with access and notions of diversity at its heart, but also a reaction to a more consumer lifestyle-oriented culture that bookshops were displaying. The bookshop may have become a ‘social club’ in the 1990s, but the public library attempted to be a more socially conscious version of that club.<sup>228</sup>

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the ideological leanings of the New Labour Government elected in 1997 reshaped cultural policy, with reading as a tool of social inclusion becoming a key strand through third-sector agencies such as Booktrust and the National Literary Trust.<sup>229</sup> Building on, as Fuller and Rehberg Sedo phrase it, ‘a belief in reading as an individually transformational, educational, therapeutic, creative, and even “civilising” experience’, this cultural policy approach inflected an ‘ideal of shared reading as a way of building community and improving of cross-cultural understandings’.<sup>230</sup> The development of successive ‘National Years of Reading’ (in 1998/9 and 2008) and activities such as the Bookstart programme (which gave out free books to babies) promoted reading as an agent of social change.<sup>231</sup> Books and the activity of reading were incorporated into neoliberal agenda, in which ‘public good’ was transmuted to ‘public value’. In late 1990s and early twenty-first century Britain, softer benefits such as social inclusion, employability and an emphasis on creativity were perceived as the primary values of reading rather than in terms of hard economics. Nonetheless, the construction of reading as an agent of social change potentially overburdened it while – at least for a short period – ploughed money into supporting it before a later period of twenty-first century austerity curtailed funding.<sup>232</sup>

The introduction of Public Lending Right (PLR) in 1979 meant that from the 1980s onwards, comprehensive records were kept of library lending in order to disburse money to authors.<sup>233</sup> The records provide evidence of the most popular genres, authors and individual titles. The fiction list for 1991-2 was dominated by popular fiction authors such as Catherine Cookson, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Dick Francis, Danielle Steel and Wilbur Smith, while Roald Dahl comprehensively led the children’s list. Non-fiction titles were more diverse, but had a leaning towards celebrity auto/biographies and TV tie-ins, as well as Peter Mayle’s Provençal travel books, *The diary of Anne Frank*, and the Department of Transport’s *Driving manual*.<sup>234</sup> Ten years later, the adult fiction list looked very similar, but the children’s list had come to be dominated by the *Harry Potter* series, and books by Jacqueline Wilson. The non-fiction titles showed a similar mix of celebrity-led titles, travel books (from Bill Bryson and

<sup>226</sup> Black, ‘The past public library observed’, p. 443.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, p. 444.

<sup>228</sup> McMenemy, *The public library*, p. 15.

<sup>229</sup> See Squires, ‘Too much Rushdie, not enough romance?’, p. 105.

<sup>230</sup> Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading beyond the book*, p. 3.

<sup>231</sup> See Chapter 26.

<sup>232</sup> Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading beyond the book*, pp. 133-4.

<sup>233</sup> See also Chapter 4.

<sup>234</sup> PLR, ‘Most borrowed titles July 1991-June 1992’,

<[www.plr.uk.com/mediaCentre/mostBorrowedTitles/top20Titles/1991-1992Top20Titles.pdf](http://www.plr.uk.com/mediaCentre/mostBorrowedTitles/top20Titles/1991-1992Top20Titles.pdf)>

Chris Stewart), *The official theory test for car drivers and motorcyclists* and a book on Windows 98, and the newer genre of ‘misery memoirs’.<sup>235</sup>

Indeed, as well as the import of the US-style book superstore, the British publishing market was also affected by another US import from the 1970s onwards: the massmarket fiction bestseller, or, as Sutherland puts it, ‘An American kind of book’. This version of the bestseller brought together a more commercial and supranational approach to publishing, an increase in levels of consumption, the importance of bestseller lists (which only really began in Britain in the 1970s), marketing hype, and cross-media synergies, such as film tie-ins and novelisations.<sup>236</sup> As the PLR lists reveal, celebritisation was also an important factor in the range of genres which were successful in library lending in the period. Anxieties about the continued place of books in society arose because of competing forms of leisure consumption (films, TV, video and DVD), but in practice books and the publishing industry worked with other cultural forms to create multimedia products.<sup>237</sup>

The literary, as opposed to the mass-market, novel had a promoter of growing significance in the Booker Prize. Founded in 1968, the prize achieved great international prominence over the subsequent decades, not least in substantially pushing sales of literary novels, and creating expanded markets for ‘quality’ books, as was the founding intent of the award, with a seasonal, event-based approach to its marketing.<sup>238</sup> As such, the more literary end of the marketplace was also commercialised over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, creating a competitive environment and opportunities for bookshop promotion. Readers responded by buying winners – and indeed shortlisted books – in great numbers.<sup>239</sup>

In the late 1990s, reading groups became another way in which readers organised their practices, and by which publishers and other media organisations could interact with them. As Jenny Hartley details in her study of the phenomenon, social and organised reading groups have a long history in Britain (and an international history elsewhere, particularly in the Anglophone world), but the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of their numbers and activities. Hartley traces the 1990s development via organisations such as public libraries, the University of the Third Age, and the Women’s Institute, but also in 1997 by the mobile telephone company Orange’s Reading Group pack, and subsequent reading groups set up by the *Mail on Sunday* and *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Largely female in membership, such groups would meet on a regular basis to discuss books, but also to perform other socialising activities.<sup>240</sup> Publishers saw such reading groups as an opportunity for promotion, and explicitly marketed books towards them.<sup>241</sup> By the early years of the twenty-first century, the phenomenon led to the TV comedy series *The Book Group*, which ran for two seasons in 2002-3.

Alongside reading groups and the Booker Prize, mediatised book clubs (such as the US’s Oprah Winfrey and the UK’s Richard and Judy, the latter discussed below), educators, book reviewers, and literary festivals, have worked, in Beth Driscoll’s argument, to create a ‘new literary middlebrow’ at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One of Driscoll’s key features of the middlebrow is that it is ‘middle class’, and certainly patterns of

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<sup>235</sup> PLR, ‘Most borrowed titles July 2001-June 2002’,  
<[www.plr.uk.com/mediaCentre/mostBorrowedTitles/top20Titles/2001-2002Top20Titles.pdf](http://www.plr.uk.com/mediaCentre/mostBorrowedTitles/top20Titles/2001-2002Top20Titles.pdf)>

<sup>236</sup> Sutherland, *Bestsellers*, pp. 10-30.

<sup>237</sup> See Chapter 29.

<sup>238</sup> Squires, ‘Literary prizes and awards’. See also Chapter 30 in this volume.

<sup>239</sup> Squires, ‘Book marketing and the Booker Prize’.

<sup>240</sup> Hartley, *The reading groups book*, p. 6.

<sup>241</sup> Fuller, Rehberg Sedo and Squires, ‘Marionettes and puppeteers?’.

cultural consumption would corroborate this statement, even if – as Driscoll herself admits – varying patterns of cultural practice occur within broad sociological categorisations.<sup>242</sup>

Reader demographic statistics confirm this: in 2005, for example, Mintel reported that while seventy-one per cent of ABs (the highest social demographic classification) had visited a bookshop, only thirty per cent of Es had. Similarly, fifty-three per cent of ABs had purchased one or more books in the last month, while only twenty-two per cent of Es had. The same set of statistics showed women to be more engaged with books and reading than men, with the heaviest book buyers and bookshop visitors being the forty-five to fifty-four age bracket.<sup>243</sup> A further 2005 study found that forty-five per cent of people ‘rarely, if ever, buy books’, while twenty-five per cent ‘read very little, if at all’, demonstrating a stratification of reader – and non-reader – behaviour.<sup>244</sup>

### *Reading in the digital age*

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw fundamental changes in the acquisition and reading of books in Britain brought about by the digital revolution in the world of print, a phenomenon often referred to as the ‘third revolution of the printed book’. This on-going digital revolution is both a global and a local phenomenon, with significant impact on both modes of access and reading, and methods of distribution and acquisition. In 2000, only a minority of British readers (26.2 per cent) were using the internet on a regular basis, and the overwhelming majority of the population would still need to buy or borrow a material copy of a printed book in order to read it; however, by 2011, 82.5 per cent of Britons had internet access at home.<sup>245</sup> Amazon entered the UK market on 15 October 1998 as an online book broker/retailer, and the first major impact of the ‘third revolution’ was on purchasing patterns rather than on format or reading practices; by the end of 2010, online retailers had captured twenty-seven per cent of the volume and thirty-one per cent of the value of total book sales, with Amazon alone accounting for more than seventy per cent of all online book retailing.<sup>246</sup> With the launch of its Kindle e-reader in the UK market in November 2009, Amazon repositioned itself as a retailer and distributor of both printed and digital reading material, with online access becoming both a means of acquisition and a mode of delivery. In the space of a decade, British readers moved from exclusively buying and borrowing books from physical outlets (book shops and libraries), to a mixed economy of acquisition, primarily ordering books online, and occasionally downloading digital content to a range of internet browsing devices, including 3G and 4G mobile phones, tablets, laptops and proprietary e-readers such as Amazon’s Kindle. Amazon.co.uk was recording a higher volume of digitally downloaded books than online purchases, with new release hardback books particularly eclipsed; by April 2011, less than eighteen months after the launch of the Kindle in the UK, e-books were outselling hardback books by a ratio of 2.4 to one.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Driscoll, *The new literary middlebrow*, pp. 17-21.

<sup>243</sup> Cited in Clark and Phillips, *Inside book publishing*, fourth edition, p. 172.

<sup>244</sup> *Expanding the book market*, p. 5.

<sup>245</sup> Figures taken from the *International Telecommunications Union* (ITU), <[www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/explorer/index.html](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/explorer/index.html)>. Accessed, 1 August 2012.

<sup>246</sup> Amazon UK corporate timeline, <<http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=251199&p=irol-corporateTimeline>>. Accessed 1 August 2012. Market share figures from *The Booksellers Association* deposition to the Office of Fair Trading, 18 July 2011 <[www.booksellers.org.uk](http://www.booksellers.org.uk)>. Accessed 1 August 2012.

<sup>247</sup> Adam Gabbatt, ‘Amazon and Waterstones report downloads eclipsing printed book sales’, *Guardian* 19 May 2011. <[www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/19/amazon-waterstones-ebook-sales](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/may/19/amazon-waterstones-ebook-sales)>. Accessed 1 August 2012]

The increase in online retailing and subsequently of digitally distributed content certainly had a negative effect on some of the traditional favourites of the British reader, the high street bookshop and the independent bookshop, with the number of independent bookshops nearly halving in the five years from 2005 (4,000) to 2010 (2,178).<sup>248</sup> At the same time, leading supermarket chains heavily discounted books, often offering them as loss leaders to consumers. However, despite the increasingly deregulated and competitive free market for book purchasing described in the previous section, and with multiple options for acquiring reading matter, British readers at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century still remained habitual buyers of material books. While book sales were impacted by fewer bookshops and pressures on disposable income, British readers in 2010 bought 225.5 million volumes (an average of 4.5 books per person per year), spending some £1.69 billion, higher than the equivalent participation figures for cinema attendance (169.2 million tickets sold, an average of 2.7 visits per person per year).<sup>249</sup>

Despite the rise of digital media and new modes of access in this decade, more established forms of cultural consumption of the book continued to hold importance. Replicating the tested formula of magazine and radio book clubs from earlier decades, and cashing in on the contemporary vogue for reading groups, in 2004 the doyennes of middlebrow cultural consumption, television chat-show hosts Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan launched the *Richard and Judy Book Club* as part of their Channel 4 TV chat show.<sup>250</sup> Translating the trusted American formula of Oprah's Book Club for British readers, each year they promoted ten books, with reviews, discussions, and author interviews embedded within their hourly chat show, which aired every weekday at 5pm; the first book featured was the 2003 Man Booker Prize winner, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, and viewers could vote for their book of the year from the shortlist. Effectively, the *Richard and Judy Book Club* operated as both a marketing device and marker of literary tastes, and had a strong impact on book sales. After moving off Channel 4 and temporarily to a cable TV channel, it then was sponsored by Thornton's (the largest British-owned chocolate manufacturer) and co-branded with one of the most established firms in British book retailing, W.H. Smith. Books selected by the book club are bundled and sold through the 1000+ physical branches of W.H. Smith's book shops as well as online through e-readers such as the Kobo, foregrounding associations with both established and emerging modes of consumption. Paralleling the changing preferences of audiences from analogue mass broadcast media to personally-optimised, digitally-delivered online content, the *Richard and Judy Book Club* moved from being a slot on their own daytime television show, to an interactive online website exclusively delivered by W.H. Smith, complete with video author interviews, podcasts, a blog, and a social media presence.<sup>251</sup> Despite this move to online delivery, the *Richard and Judy Book Club* continues to champion readers' preferences for the novel as a genre, and the material book as an established means for consuming it. In late 2013, they launched 'Richard and Judy's search for a bestseller', a competition with a £50,000 prize,

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<sup>248</sup> James Hall, 'Internet and supermarket kill off 2,000 bookshops', *Daily Telegraph* 2 September 2011. <[www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/8738701/Internet-and-supermarkets-kill-off-2000-bookshops.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/8738701/Internet-and-supermarkets-kill-off-2000-bookshops.html)>. Accessed, 1 August 2012.

<sup>249</sup> Philip Stone, 'Book sales in 2010 fall by more than 3%', *Bookseller* 5 January 2011. <[www.thebookseller.com/news/book-sales-2010-fall-more-3.html](http://www.thebookseller.com/news/book-sales-2010-fall-more-3.html)>. Accessed, 1 August 2012; Ben Keen, 'BSAC Conference UK movie market update'. <[www.bsac.uk.com/files/uk\\_movie\\_market\\_update\\_2011.pdf](http://www.bsac.uk.com/files/uk_movie_market_update_2011.pdf)>. Accessed 1 August 2012.

<sup>250</sup> Ramone and Cousins (eds), *The Richard and Judy Book Club reader*; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading beyond the book*, pp. 50-90.

<sup>251</sup> <<http://richardandjudy.whsmith.co.uk>>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

designed to showcase first-time novelists, while earlier that year, Maddeley became a first-time novelist himself.<sup>252</sup>

Despite the continuing emphasis on the material book and – in the continuing shared reading practices of book clubs and what Fuller and Rehberg Sedo have termed ‘Mass Reading Events’, or MREs – the impact of technology has also had a substantial effect on reading in the digital twenty-first century. Social media have provided platforms for authors, publishers and readers to communicate about books, share reading lists, and network. Amazon’s Customer Comments, book blogs, vlogs and ‘BookTubes’, Twitter hashtags used for digital and in-real-life literary festivals, the sharing of reading lists and recommendations on Goodreads, virtual browsing via Google’s ‘snippet view’ and Amazon’s ‘look inside’, gamification – with reading ‘awards’ – via Kobo’s Reading Life, and annotation tools such as the ‘highlights’ function on the Kindle all provide opportunities for socially networked reader activity.<sup>253</sup> Such technologies and the practices they generate can provide traces for the historian of contemporary reading which have already been taken up by scholars; they can also give data to technology companies on customer behaviour or – as some might see it – surveillance opportunities.<sup>254</sup>

As Chapter 3 details, digital technologies have also radically enabled self-publishing, via platforms such as Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing and Wattpad. As well as providing large hinterlands of text, digital self-publishing platforms respond to readers’ tastes in a much more immediate way than the traditional gatekeeping model of publishing does. One of the biggest selling series of the second decade of the twenty-first century, E.L. James’s *Fifty shades* trilogy, started life as fan fiction before transitioning to traditional publication. A new publishing sub-genre for erotica, flavoured with BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadomasochism) scenes was reborn for the mainstream market, thereby – at least for a short while – shaping bestselling reading tastes.

Perhaps because of the increasing complexity of readers’ engagements with books and other forms of reading matter in a highly competitive multimedia environment, discourses of anxiety around reading (implicitly about *not* reading, or reading non-literary works) still circulated in popular discourse and informed policy making at the start of the twenty-first century. The locus of these anxieties – whether substantiated by statistical evidence or not – has invariably been the reading habits of children, especially teenagers, who constitute a new generation of ‘digital native’ readers, for whom traditional models of acquiring, owning and reading books might be challenging, or even alien. An online survey in November 2010 by the National Literacy Trust of 18,141 schoolchildren aged between eight and seventeen found a direct correlation between the number of printed books owned and kept at home, the enjoyment derived from reading as a pastime, and educational achievement. They found that young people who owned books were twice as likely (26.6 per cent) to like reading very much compared to those who did not own books (13.1 per cent), while children who did not own books of their own were nearly four times more likely not to enjoy reading at all (23.7 per cent) than those who did own books (6.7 per cent).<sup>255</sup> Nearly one in ten children who didn’t possess books of their own (9.4 per cent) also reported that there were no books of any kind at home, while a further 29.8 per cent estimated that there were fewer than ten books at home, starkly indicating that the paucity of printed books at home reinforced a negative attitude to reading. However, while this cohort grew up as digital

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<sup>252</sup> <<http://richardandjudy.whsmith.co.uk/search-for-a-bestseller>>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

<sup>253</sup> Ray Murray and Squires, ‘The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit’, pp. 14-18.

<sup>254</sup> Rowberry, ‘Ebookness’, p. 12.

<sup>255</sup> Clark and Poulton, *Book ownership*.



natives, they proved to be discriminatory in their leisure (as opposed to curricular) reading habits, with printed fiction (56.6 per cent) the third most popular type of material (after magazines and SMS text messages) and well ahead of websites, blogs, e-mails, and even e-books (6.1 per cent) which surprisingly proved to be the least popular form for leisure reading. Anxieties over the role of public libraries and the decline in bookshops were also evident in the National Literacy Trust survey; 5.2 per cent of children who owned books and 12.6 per cent of those who did not own books had never visited a library, while the numbers who had never visited a bookshop were even higher (8.3 per cent and 21.5 per cent respectively).

While these figures might indicate the decline in a reading culture amongst twenty-first century young people (an anxiety continuously aired and reinforced in public discourse), statistics collected by the PLR suggest just the opposite; for the period from July 2009 to June 2010, no fewer than seven of the ten most borrowed authors were children's writers, with Jacqueline Wilson's books having been borrowed at least a million times in every single year (2000-2010) that decade.<sup>256</sup> The pattern continued later into the century, with 2014-15 statistics showing six out of the ten most heavily borrowed authors being a writer for children.<sup>257</sup> PLR figures contradict predictions of the demise of the habit of children acquiring and reading printed books from the public library system in the face of the onslaught of digital media, and indeed, tangibly demonstrate the appetite of young people for readily accessible, free material that they want to read – something not always offered by distributors of online content.

### *Beyond the printed book?*

By the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, then, British readers were fully enmeshed in the effects of the third revolution of the printed book, witnessed by the mass digitisation of the back catalogue of printed books and new modes of reading instantly and conveniently enabled through a range of e-reading devices delivering content downloaded from online retailers, such as Amazon and iTunes. Increasingly, twenty-first century consumers of reading matter are being presented with information in the form of online structured content, with text accompanied by audio-visual or other interactive material. Often, text is not presented in the standard sequential arrangement familiar to readers through many centuries of engagement with the codex, but rather through a series of interlinked objects that can be accessed, viewed or interrogated in relation to one another, either continuously or discontinuously. While e-readers have consciously mimicked the material conventions of the codex (successive iterations of the Kindle for example, have kept the proportions of the most popular paperback formats as well as its portrait orientation) the reading practices that are possible include both linear and non-linear reading, both turning pages and scrolling, in either or both directions. Nowhere is this flexibility of possibilities more evident than in the rise of e-magazines, often delivered through apps and attached to brands promoting other forms of leisure consumption such as travel, online shopping or use of social media. This kind of discursive reading might indicate new practices analogous to those that accompanied earlier developments in ephemeral reading during the era of print.

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<sup>256</sup> Maev Kennedy, 'Children's authors dominate list of favourite UK library books', *Guardian* 18 February 2011. <[www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/feb/18/children-top-library-books-authors?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/feb/18/children-top-library-books-authors?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487)>. Accessed, 1 August 2012.

<sup>257</sup> Public Lending Right, 'Most borrowed authors July 2014-June 2015'. <[www.plr.uk.com/mediaCentre/mostBorrowedAuthors/top20Authors/2014-2015Top20AuthorsRevised.pdf](http://www.plr.uk.com/mediaCentre/mostBorrowedAuthors/top20Authors/2014-2015Top20AuthorsRevised.pdf)>. Accessed 1 August 2012]

But while e-books and other more sophisticated forms of interactive, text based, multimedia content have potentially fostered a wide range of different modes of acquisition and possible consumption, it is debatable whether this will in fact increase either the amount of time spent reading, or the range and diversity of material being read. Ironically, ease of access is sometimes inversely proportional to breadth of coverage or availability of choice; whether e-readers and digital content actually foster a demand-driven, infinitely long-tail, or merely promote a succession of short-lived bestsellers, remains to be seen. Studies of book borrowing from public and subscription libraries in earlier periods in British history have demonstrated that the availability of books does not by itself guarantee their use, nor is the cost of access determined only by library membership charges or the price of books. In the nineteenth-century, the cost of access to books was determined as much by the development of the railways (and therefore, the cost of travel) as by the price structures of circulating libraries; indeed, it was the falling cost of public transport that both facilitated particular reading practices and made possible the distribution of new genres and formats for books. In the twenty-first century, the cost of access to books and other reading matter is increasingly determined by the price of internet access (especially data download and roaming mobile access through 3G and 4G capable devices) and cumulative data storage (such as reliable Cloud networking), as well as by costs that are often surreptitiously passed on to consumers, such as VAT charged on electronic content (but not on printed books), optional individual customisation of books (such as electronic skins in lieu of dust-jackets), and the acquisition, maintenance and energy (recharging) costs for e-reading devices. The business models behind digital books have also changed how book ownership operates. Digital book readers no longer own copies on platforms such as the Kindle and Apple's iBooks library, but instead have licences to them. Moving British readers from the tax exempt world of printed books to taxed digital content with optional add-ons generates new revenue streams for both distributors and government, while passing on invisible costs to consumers. It also exposes readers (as consumers) to far higher levels of scrutiny, content control and direct commercial marketing than ever before.

Despite the inexorable rise of digital content, readers have so far remained more than merely sentimentally attached to printed books in a digital age. Indeed, the ubiquity and ease of access to e-books might even encourage a new bibliophilia for material books, for while downloading an e-book is an immediate and convenient method of accessing information, it is both anonymous and discreet: a Kindle cannot visibly articulate and display the cultural capital, literary tastes and social standing of the owner the way books on a shelf can so instantly and tellingly. Indeed, by the middle of the 2010s, ebook sales started to plateau and even decrease in popularity. IKEA has sold forty-one million units of its iconic 'Billy' book case since its introduction in 1979 (the same year as the first demonstration of the now already largely obsolescent CD), with current global sales of around three million units a year and still rising, despite the rapid growth of e-readers and downloaded content in the last decade.<sup>258</sup> Of course, not all 'Billy' book cases are used solely to house books, but with each having the capacity to hold some 250 standard format paperback books, this suggests that (potentially at least) the shelf space to display over ten billion books (significantly more than the equivalent of one book per human on the planet) has been sold to householders across the world in the last thirty years.

This extraordinary sales phenomenon demonstrates more than merely aesthetic preferences (book-lined shelves promoting domestic conviviality, or the material culture of

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<sup>258</sup> Lucy Mangan, 'The Billy bookcase: 30 and still going strong', *Guardian* 5 October 2009. <[www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/oct/05/ikea-billy-bookcase](http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/oct/05/ikea-billy-bookcase)>. Accessed, 1 August 2012; Pyne, *Bookshelf*, pp. 94-8, 104.

gift-giving around books), or the inculcated habits of reading printed books ingrained in a pre-digital childhood. Rather it strongly indicates that twenty-first century readers are still committed to printed books for their durability, cost of acquisition, ease of use, portability, and stability of format, despite their enthusiastic recent adoption of electronic media. Indeed, it is the printed book's low technology (it needs no mediation or reading device to access and incurs no fixed costs beyond domestic storage and lighting) that is the main reason for its resistance to obsolescence – unlike, perhaps, the majority of the different e-readers and e-book delivery systems currently competing for market share (there are well over 100 different devices available for sale, *not* including smart phones and tablets), most of which will invariably be superseded long before the end of the century. Far from simply replacing one mode of acquiring and reading books with another, perhaps twenty-first century readers might prove to be adept and proficient at accessing and engaging with reading matter (including the printed book) in a range of different ways.

[CS and ST]